

THE LADIES



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PART ONE

CAPTAIN FLOOD

Chapter One

CAPTAIN FLOOD walked across his side yard to the chairs under the walnut tree. He moved stiffly and precisely, slipping a little on the nuts hidden in the grass, but holding stubbornly to the shortest way and treading under noisily the tall dry grass and the drift of dead leaves. When he reached his goal he turned, grasping the chair's back, and looked at his house and felt again the sustaining sense of position, of security, of authority the sight gave him. He knew that the moment and his own emotion called for an attitude, and his body straightened, his free hand sought his breast and slipped between the buttons of his high white waistcoat, and he lifted his face, long and lean and vacant and noble, like an old dog, an old horse, an old statesman, and closed his eyes. He stood rigid, given over to his powerful unnamed emotion, and the delicious moisture of sentiment pricked in his dry eyeballs and in the dry hairy caverns of his nose.

The Floods lived at the end of the village street in an old wooden house whose boards had been for many years as naked and colorless as stone. It was built after the fashion of the deeper South, but without dignity: squeezed into one corner of a long shallow lot, too high for its width, a sagging double porch across its front, the skimpy columns wreathed with the dry gray tangle of a wistaria vine that had been blossomless for a generation.

The narrow back yard was full of litter, of drying clothes forgotten overnight, of chickens and cats and an old dog in the sun. The chickens belonged to Dell and she made the

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time to look after them a little. For the others, she set out the garbage once a day, and the cats thrived but the dog died young and was mangy and toothless from his youth. Laura and Matty exclaimed over the kittens when they were little, petting them in their laps and setting out forbidden saucers of milk; and when the dog forsook the sunshine and lay moaning on the kitchen steps, Callie wormed him and gave him peace. But most of the time they were forgotten, and it did not seem strange to the Captain that he could come out into the yard in the early morning and his dog not come up to greet him and to stretch out at his feet. Nevertheless, he would have thought it a queer thing not to have cats and a dog about the place.

The side yard where Captain Flood stood was full of tall grass and flowering weeds. The walnut tree made a bare shady patch in the rank growth and covered the ground roundabout with its hard, green, slippery balls. A row of high ragged berry bushes ran across the yard, cutting it in half, and behind them was the vegetable-garden black Milton worked on shares. In the corner farthest from the house, at the Captain's back as he stood under the walnut tree, was the Office, a little two-room cottage built straight up from the street, where he had installed his wife's mother and unmarried sister when he came back home to live.

The Captain looked at his house, feeling proudly that it was the old Flood house, one of the big places of the village, and that it belonged to him. He did not see or care that it had gone to ruin. The grass he walked through brushed his legs and the mosquitoes settled blackly on his thick white socks and stung unavailingly against his hard, accustomed shins. On the house the blinds hung crazily against the unpainted sides, and under the porch, hidden by a lattice, lay the accumulated rubbish of years—old tools and rusting iron and tin and odds and ends of lumber—and gave off a strong, sharp odor of decay. When Milt crawled

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in to look for something in the trash, he came out shaking the cockroaches off like dust. The Captain could not handle a hammer nor fit a broken board, and every green thing that grew on the earth was equal in his eyes and he was indifferent whether it lived or died. He had no instinct of the farmer or workman, and so it did not hurt him to see his house in decay and his land grown wild and bitter; the knowledge that he owned it was enough to satisfy his pride.

Within the house his wife and his daughters had their whole existence; after himself it was the center of their lives. Looking at it now, he pictured them busy in it, absorbed in the ritual of its care which had made him and his fathers important and comfortable men. At this time in the morning it was still closed and silent. In it, he thought, like birds, like lambs, confined and protected and secure, his dear ones were asleep.

The sun had risen, but it was still hidden by the early-morning mist, and the Captain looked up at the sky, hoping with a painful urgency that it would be a fine day. After the mail a fine day was the most important thing in life. As he gazed up the sun shone out and bathed him in its thin autumn brightness, and he said aloud: "Anh. The sun is a mighty good thing, I tell you. It isn't a thing I'd like to be without." Soon it would be dark at six o'clock, and he thought with a faint foreboding of early winter mornings when the restlessness that comes upon old people would rout him out of his bed to wander through the dark, cold, sleeping house.

It was early in the autumn, but the Captain had already changed from his summer white to a sort of uniform of heavy blue cloth with brass buttons, and the stuffy warmth of his winter clothes was grateful in the feeble sunshine. He sat down and took off his hat and smoothed his thick gray hair, well-brushed and clipped and pungent with bay rum. He had always been a handsome man and careful of his person, and now he was spruce and clean with the curious

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musty cleanliness of old men who wear ancient wool and clean linen, who neither bathe nor sweat, whose heavy garments have lain in closed chests through so many summers, who anoint their hair and scraped cheeks with aromatic lotions, whose breaths are redolent of strong coffee, of lozenges, of whisky, whose very flesh is impregnated with tobacco. His suit was wrinkled, but there were no spots on it; his white vest and socks and high laced boots were clean; and there was a fresh bud, one of the last fall roses, in his buttonhole. He smoothed his hair and thought: "Not many men my age have such a suit of hair. No man has unless he has led him a clean, wholesome life."

His face was tanned, and above the deep line on his forehead the dry brown skin was paler and his light eyes were narrow and webbed with wrinkles. He liked to think that he would be known anywhere for a seaman by his look, and he spoke of himself as a man whose life had been passed on far treacherous seas. Although he was forty years old at the time of the Civil War, he often said that if it had not been for the war he would surely have gone, like his son Ralph, into the United States Navy. "Ah," he said, "There's a fine career for a man! The Navy's a noble life for a man, I can tell you! There's no greater thing anywhere on this earth today than the Navy of the United States of America, and I'm proud to say it as a former officer in the sister service of our great Confederacy! The North and the United States," he said. "Don't you forget there's two mighty different things."

He was a warehouse clerk in Norfolk at the beginning of the war, and he enlisted at once, filled with the confused excitement of his new hot loyalty and of relief at being quit of a job he had held for close on to five years. During the war he was a tallyman, checking ships' rations and soapstone and coils of rope. Afterwards he could not bring himself to part with the uniform and the discipline which give to

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every man, no matter what his rank, his own importance. He shipped as supercargo on a freight-boat of his old employers, checking accounts and bills of lading from Baltimore to Norfolk to Savannah, and on an occasional run farther south. He relished the glances cast at his old naval uniform and the good-natured salutes of the men. When he retired he was called Captain in his village and he came to think of himself as somehow an officer in the Navy. "It's a pity," he said, "that I frivoleed away my young manhood, for it's plain to see that I was cut out for the Service. The Navy was my real love, but failing that I made a middling-good merchantman. Had I gone earlier into the Service there's no telling where I might have got to with the war to push me on."

He spoke slightly of his youth, but secretly he felt himself to have been a spirited young fellow. His father meant him to be a lawyer, and so he had read law for a year at the University. But he was restless there, diverted by thoughts of professions more to his liking and in his heart conscious of the drawback to them all: all of them took years of precious life. He left his studies and went from town to town, working awhile in most of the principal cities of the state, thinking himself a mighty traveled man though the war was over before he ever went beyond its borders. He worked on newspapers, for the telegraph company, for the express company, for the railroad. All his work was routine and unimportant, done with many other men for great organizations. But he liked the company of his fellows and he liked a big concern, something he could look up to. "Oh, I've had a deal to do with the real development of this country!" he liked to say. "But I always wish I'd been with the telephone company now, or the government."

Even during the war he had not been able to feel himself the enemy of his government, of that colossus of power and authority for which even the discipline and the self-importance of war were a poor substitute. The President. The Flag. The

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Confederacy. The United States of America. Words like these made an ache in his breast and a mist before his eyes. . He retired when he was sixty and the last fifteen years had been the happiest and the busiest of his life.

There were certain jobs about the house he did himself. Every year he painted the chairs in his favorite spot under the walnut tree with a great to-do of cleaning brushes and mixing paint and laying newspapers to catch the drip. He rose early, and in winter he laid the fires. He was enormously proud of the way he placed the paper and kindling and the big logs above, so accurately that in a moment he had a fine day-long fire blazing up the chimney with not a charred twig on the hearth or a wisp of smoke to cloud the room. In the fall he raked the leaves and dead grass together and burned them in the street, standing ready to give the passers-by a lecture on burning rubbish in the open, of which he had made a rite hemmed about with rule and prohibition. He could not abide a creaking hinge, and from time to time he went around the house, serious and intent, with a dripping oilcan and allayed the squeakings of the doors and gate. These things made him the head of his house and an efficient and practical man.

He was never too busy to have a hand in his family's affairs, to keep a benevolent but authoritative eye on the doings of his women. He had had a long delightful intrigue to get Ralph's appointment to Annapolis. Now the girls were growing up to be pretty creatures and there would be suitors to harry, to choose among, and to discard. He had four daughters at home and the youngest was just fifteen; there were many pleasant years of power ahead for him.

And there was always politics to confirm him in his importance. For fifteen happy bustling years he had served his Party, and had marked highways and collected taxes and taken the census, had been appraiser and constable and sheriff. He belonged to a half-dozen fraternal orders, besides, and

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there was scarcely a year when he did not go, gorgeously robed and titled, as a delegate to a state convention. "A man of my connections carries weight," he said, "even in the great Democratic Party."

Before each election he stumped the county for the Democratic candidate and was moved to tears by his own eloquence and that of the speakers on both sides. All through the year he drove in a borrowed buggy, seeing people, advising them and doing favors for them, rounding up voters for the Party.

He had left the state only once, and that was to make the trip to Washington while Arthur was President. He shook his hand and it was a great experience for him, but he always regretted that he had not waited for Cleveland. He thought with optimism that he might find a way to go again now that Grover Cleveland was back in the White House. A Democrat twice President of the United States, Ralph a lieutenant-commander in the Navy, himself sheriff of the county! He fingered the bright shield he always wore and thought: "The South is in her rightful place again, at the very head and forefront of this great nation!"

He settled himself in the rocking-chair in the sun and unfolded his paper. It was a week-old copy of the *New York Times* some one had sent over to him. He carried it around, leafing through it again when he was alone, holding it wide open on his knee and wetting his thumb two or three times quickly before he turned a page. It was a perpetual pleasure to him to mention that the *Times* was a Democratic paper. He said: "It isn't just an accident, I can tell you, when the biggest newspaper in the biggest city in this country stands behind the Democratic Party!" He leafed through the paper now without reading it, knowing, without having to read it, that the opinion of this powerful journal tallied with his own. When he came to the end he folded his *Times* like a club, and feeling the thickness of it in his hand, seeing the word "Cleve-

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land" in big black letters like a seal upon it, he struck it on his knee and said: "Anh, a great man! A great paper!"

Captain Flood looked up and saw his mother-in-law coming toward him across the yard, carrying a heavy tray of soiled dishes. He rose and took it from her gallantly, setting it down upon the grass. Then he kissed her cheek: "How do, Mother Hack. It's a pretty morning. Kind o' cool, however."

"Umm?" she hummed. "Good morning, Alec. Well, son, old folks are early risers."

He laughed loudly, "Heh! Heh!" covering her indiscretion with his dry ready laughter. He felt obscurely that to have a mother-in-law so near his own age was not a credit to him, and he laughed and cracked his fingers and shifted the conversation nervously whenever she bracketed them as two old people. He said quickly, "And how did you leave our dear Sophie this fine morning?"

It was distinctly a credit to him that never once in all these years had he neglected to inquire for Sophie. He added: "Poor Sophie. A noble woman, Mother. A good daughter and a true sister. Her poor health only makes her the dearer to us all."

Mrs. Hack hummed vaguely, "Umm?"

"Sophie!" he repeated, loudly, with an edge to the filial deference of his tone.

"Umm? She's about as usual, poor child. Though she has a good appetite. Better now than it ever was, I often think. Sophie was always one to be finicky with her food."

"Heh?"

"Good appetite!" Mrs. Hack cried, with faint asperity.

"Heh! Ah. Well now, that's a good thing. A good appetite is a real blessing, I can tell you."

The Captain moved his chair and Mrs. Hack's, pulling them out into the weak level rays of the early sun. A little put out with each other, though neither one would admit it, they sat silently rocking, waiting for the new day to begin.

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For fifteen years Mrs. Hack and Sophie had lived in the Office in the corner of the side yard. The Captain thought it only fitting for his wife's mother and sister to make their home with him, when John Hack was married and had his own wife's relatives to look out for. Both women had begged him to leave them in Norfolk; but while keeping a boarding-house was a perfectly proper occupation for a widow with unmarried daughters, it was not to be thought of when a son-in-law could offer her a comfortable home. He urged Mrs. Hack to think of Clare and the help she could be to her with the children; he urged Sophie to consider her mother, who would be protected and easy in her old age. It was a mite hard for them, perhaps, for Norfolk was a big city, and with the boarders there were always people going in and out; hard especially for Sophie, who, over thirty and unmarried, was as safely buried in the village as in her grave. But the Captain could not bring himself to permit them to stay behind. It outraged every instinct to think of leaving to themselves two women who had a claim on his support. So they came in the end, and settled themselves in the Office, and at first Sophie occupied herself with keeping a little school. The Captain commended her warmly, for he liked to see a woman busy as long as she was suitably employed, and he sent her all his seven children.

After several years the news came from Norfolk that John Hack's mother-in-law was dead, and at once it was plain that some one must go to him for the Captain knew he was not the sort of man to care to feel himself under an obligation. Sophie longed to go, but at the time it seemed to him wiser to send Agnes, the third of his five daughters. He felt uneasily that Sophie had held his decision against him. "Though goodness knows," he thought, "a man don't often look at a woman Sophie's age even in a big place like Norfolk." No one understood that better than he. When he first boarded with the Hacks and found himself thinking seriously of

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marriage, it seemed almost as though it were his duty to marry Sophie. He liked her well enough and she was a good housekeeper, a nice-looking woman too, nearing thirty and a fit match for a man his age; he told himself so often. But there was ten years between the sisters and he was close on fifty and his mouth watered for youth. He thought wistfully, "If I'd been more of a loose-liver, mebbe I might of had a better stomach for an old wife."

After Agnes went to live with her uncle in Norfolk, Sophie gave up her school and began to mope. At first it was just a backwardness in company, and then a tendency to put her hands to her face and peer out between her fingers, and now she went about with her face covered (a pillow-case, the children said, over her head), and refused to let anyone in the house. For five years none of them had laid eyes on Sophie. Mrs. Hack carried her meals on a tray and put the slops and water-bucket outside the door for Dell. The children would go down and peep in the window, and sometimes they woke up with nightmares, dreaming that Aunt Sophie was after them, or some such child's foolishness. Captain Flood had no patience with that. "Sophie," he said, sternly, "is a saint." A little queerness in a woman her age and unmarried was only to be expected. She had been deeply mortified by the hair that had appeared suddenly on her face. She clipped it at first, and that had made it as stiff as bristles, and her fingers strayed constantly over her cheeks and chin, plucking at the little clumps of hair until the skin around them was raw and red. It was no great wonder that she had come to keep herself to herself; nevertheless, when the Captain thought of the two women shut up in the Office in the corner of his yard, he felt a curious vague compunction, and made haste to say: "Mother Hack and Sophie are two fine and lovely women. Real women, as God meant them to be. Their every thought their whole life long has been for others,

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and the happiness of their loved ones their reward. Their lives are surely a pattern for us all."

The Captain and Mrs. Hack sat silently in the sun. Now and then he said, aloud: "Yes, it's surely a fine day." And she hummed gently in reply. But for the most part they sat together without speaking.

Captain Flood cleared his throat from time to time and struck his folded paper rhythmically upon his knee. He could not endure a silence; even when he was alone he spoke aloud his thoughts upon the cool day or the warmth of the sun, and tapped with his foot or stick, and made loud sudden noises behind his nose. At last he said: "I told you I had letters yesterday from both the children. Yes. A letter from Ralph and Agnes, both in the one day, that was a real treat for me." He laid his newspaper carefully on the ground and felt in his breast pocket for the letters. "It ain't often they miss writing me once a week. Sometimes it's only a postcard, but a postcard's a whole lot better than nothing." He recollected now that he had read the letters aloud at the supper table the night before, and decided that he would not read them again unless she asked him to. He coughed restlessly, waiting for her to speak. "Why on earth," he thought, "don't the old lady bestir herself and say something?" He said, aloud, sighing: "Ah Lord! Yes, they're good children."

"Ummm?" Mrs. Hack heard him, but she looked away to hide her tears, for she was still thinking of her own child, of Sophie. It seemed she could not keep her mind away from her these days and the tears that would upset Alec came so often to her eyes. She twisted her fingers in her lap in her distress. The Captain, aroused now, gave a loud imperative, "Heh?" and she hastened to say, gentle and polite: "Yes. They are indeed. But you're a good man, Alec. You deserve your children."

Still she said nothing about the letters. Surely it was not in nature to suppose that she was not interested in her own

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grandchildren, and he reflected that the old lady grew more hard of hearing every day she lived. "Likely enough," he thought, "she didn't hear half of what's in 'em the first time. It 'u'd be a kindness to read 'em out to her again."

When he had finished them they sat in silence again, broken by his periodic cough and snuffle, and watched the day clear and strengthen. When people are old the weather is important. You draw in life from the sun. Nobody can die in the bright sunshine.

Dell came, and walked around to the kitchen, careful not to see the tray of dirty dishes on the grass. People were going by now on the street, and as they passed they glanced in the Flood yard and called out good morning. It was very gratifying the way everyone took the trouble to speak.

Mr. Tom Weems stopped by the gate with the Baltimore and Richmond papers he brought over every morning, and the Captain hurried down to meet him. Mrs. Hack took up her heavy tray and slipped around with it to the back.

"Good morning, Captain," Mr. Tom Weems boomed. "You planning to go down to the Reunion?"

"Heh? Why, yes, Tom, I'm going." The Captain brought his hand down on the gatepost smartly. "I don't know how just yet, but I'm surely going someways. Ralph sent me ten dollars towards my fare. Tom, you know that's a good boy!"

Mr. Tom Weems took a bill from his wallet. "Here, Captain. With all you've done for the Democratic Party, and you a veteran and one of the town's important officers, why, it 'u'd be a shame and a disgrace if you didn't get to go to the Reunion. You'll oblige me and all your admirers by accepting this as a small token of our obligation to you for your services and for what you stand for in this community."

Captain Flood took the bill and folded it carefully. "Well, Tom, when you put it like that I don't see how I could rightly refuse it."

Mr. Weems went on to his office in the bank, and the Cap-

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tain turned, and saw that while he was talking the girls had come down and were working in the garden. He crossed the yard and stood watching them over the row of berry bushes. They came down early mornings to weed and spade a little. If they did not look over the fruit and vegetables before Milt came, he would as likely as not be round to the kitchen door to say that today there wasn't nothing there hardly worth the bringing in.

Captain Flood liked to watch the girls. Callie was perhaps his favorite. She was fairer than her sisters, her hair more brown than black, and had his own pale eyes. He watched her fingering the plants, gentle and intent, her lips moving silently to build up with whispered words a wall against her thoughts. Callie always talked to herself. He smiled. Callie going about her work whispering to herself that she must tell Milton and speak to Dell and remind Mamma and be sure to get something at Lucas's when she went for the mail—none of them was off her mind for long. He thought fondly that she was a real little woman, so studious of their comfort, like a little mother to her sisters and a little wife to him.

He looked at the girls moving about their work and recognized that they were his. Ralph and Agnes might take after their mother's side, but Robert, if he had lived, would have been his, too. He was immensely proud of the likeness, feeling it a kind of accomplishment that with the terrifying passive power of futility he had stamped himself so plainly upon five of his seven children. His daughters in their girls' way were, he liked to say, the very spit of him. They had his long head, his regular features and carved mouth and high, noble, empty forehead. Their bodies were his—tall and slight and drooping, with big hands and feet, too uncoordinated, too delicately put together, for any sustained effort; but everything that was needed for living—lungs and heart and teeth and tissue—would wear like iron. He was

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proud of his family's hold on life; he liked to say that a Flood would think it a disgrace to die before ninety at the least. Nevertheless, he was glad that the girls did not look too strong. He liked their fine-grained yellow skins and dark-circled eyes; he could not abide a bustling, horsey woman. Only his wife's enormous placidity reconciled him to her health and strength. He often said that he would tolerate no female with pants on in his house. As long as his daughters showed a few ladylike talents of the parlor and kitchen and grew up to be pretty women, he was content. Callie's music and exquisite sewing, Bess's light rolls and taste for books, Laura's preserves and pickles and warm-heartedness, Matty's cream candy and brilliant prettiness, more than satisfied him. "There's no young women living to touch my daughters," he often told them, fondly. He even enjoyed their frequent indispositions and the outward signs of their indifferent health: aromatic spirits and soda, iron tonic in a tall brown bottle on the sideboard, handkerchiefs soaked with cologne, cold cloths and darkened rooms. When his wife had one of her rare dreadful headaches he liked her the better for it, and tiptoed clumsily in and out to see if she wanted anything, and sat patiently stroking her arm or forehead, and felt himself to be more than ever the protector and master of his household.

He had never been ill a day in his life, but then he was a man and could wear out his restlessness and fret with travel and adventure. He had seen the sea, and the snow and clouds of the high mountains. He had seen wonders like Natural Bridge and the Endless Caverns; the great universities at Charlottesville and Lexington; the great business towns of Roanoke and Norfolk; centers of fashion like White Sulphur and the Hot Springs and Richmond; he had been in Winchester and Staunton and Harrisonburg and scores of lesser places. He had eaten sea food in Baltimore and seen the historic beauties of Charleston and Savannah; he had gone as

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far south as Jacksonville and seen the Minorcans dark as Spaniards and the foreign streets and tropic flowers of St. Augustine. He had been in a war and he had sailed in a ship on the Atlantic Ocean.

There had been no such glamorous interludes for his women. Life ran evenly for them—quiet days spent sewing in Mamma's room and puttering in the garden; long evenings spent on the porch or in the dining-room around the stove, while Callie played the piano or Bess read aloud and the Captain and Mamma had their game of cards on the dinner table. Their indigestion and colds and aching backs and appalling headaches were a sort of solace, a break and a color in the routine of their lives.

The Captain looked on while three of his four girls worked in the garden, and from time to time he snorted and cleared his throat. When they did not look up, he asked, "Where's Bess this morning?"

Laura said, briefly, "Still dressing herself up for the school, I guess."

"Now is she, indeed?" He could not bear to let a speech pass unremarked. "Still upstairs dressing, is she? She must be making herself mighty fine."

The girls said nothing, and he felt uncomfortable for a moment, almost uncertain of himself. It was not always easy with his daughters. There were so many of them, and they looked at him sometimes as though they were leagued against him, waiting for something, still expecting something, from him as their right. He had given them a good home and a Christian raising, a name and a place to be proud of, the protection of a father and the bulwark of his authority; what more, in the name of conscience, could they expect of him? Lately he had found himself thinking wistfully of the time when they were children; they had been so sweet, so innocent, so affectionate with him. When they ran up to him hand-in-hand or stood together and kissed, he had cried out

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with pleasure, "Ah, who could wish for a prettier sight!" His children kissing, his wife with a baby in her lap—there was something for a man to look at that would warm his heart! He was a man who dearly loved his family, and it seemed a sort of sacrilege to him to go beyond his natural unquestioning delight in them. He remembered his joy when Matty was born, his seventh child, and come to him at a time when most men can only hope to hold grandchildren in their arms. At such a time who could expect him to think of the child's future, or of money, or of a wife who had borne seven children before she was twenty-nine?

Recalling the old happy days of their little-childhood, he passed from regret to pleasure in his memories, and from that to his pride in the girls now, so pretty and docile and industrious, each one a credit to him; and he called out to them to leave their work and come and talk to him. The breakfast bell sounded and he went toward the house with a daughter on each arm.

He kept them waiting while he went up to wash his hands. Upstairs in his room he splashed his face and hands, leaving the water in the basin and his wife's scented soap streaked with dirt and the clean embroidered towel crumpled on the floor. Spoiling his wife's dainty arrangements gave him the satisfaction another man would have felt in ruffling a pretty woman. The purpose of both was to pleasure a man, to delight his eye and to serve his comfort; it was his privilege to ruin them.

He came down the steps slowly, his hand on the rail, his head erect, his knees splayed stiffly out, while they waited for him in the hall. It was a little shock to him to see that Bess was not there yet, and that this morning he would not be the last one down for breakfast.

But when Bess did come down she looked so pretty that he forgave her. She was the plainest of the girls, but today she had taken great pains with herself and he thought that

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she showed up well enough with the others. He led the way into the dining-room, and sat down, pushing back his cup and plate and clashing all his silver together in a little heap and so making himself master of the table. He glanced around to catch the attention of his audience, and spoke to them with an orator's unction, mouthing his words so that his big yellow teeth and pale tongue, broad and thick and veined like a leaf, showed curiously bold and coarse between his fine-cut lips: "Well, daughter, a little tardiness don't matter when you've made such a picture of yourself for us. Heh? Now I doubt very much if those country boys and girls ever laid their eyes on a prettier teacher."

Bess blushed and smiled, and he reached over and patted her arm. When he saw one of the girls so sweet and bright he could not help but take it to himself, and the sight made him proud and happy.

Her sisters looked at Bess, at the new dress and hat, and they pictured her to themselves driving grandly down the road in Peach's buggy. This year Mr. Tom Weems had got her the country school. He had promised it to her when she was twenty-one, and he had kept his word. It was understood tacitly among the girls that the school was for them all, that it would pass from one to another of them in turn, that one by one it would take them out of Mamma's room into life.

Matty realized suddenly that all the others were ahead of her. It would be years before her turn came, and they stretched ahead of her, dull and unendurable, while one by one the girls drove off to freedom in gay new clothes and Peach's buggy; and she pushed back her breakfast and put her head down in her arms on the table, and cried: "Oh my goodness! I wish I was dead!"

The Captain cried, startled, "'Dead!'" The word was horrible to him. He could not understand how anyone could bring himself to use it lightly. He collected himself: "Life

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is a mighty good thing to hold on to, daughter, I can tell you that."

Bess looked at him. "Why, Papa, what's life ever done for you?"

He was stricken. "'Done for me!'" he stammered. "Why—why, it's let me live, that's all." He repeatedly firmly and with dignity: "It's let me live. And as long as it does that I'm satisfied. You'll feel that way, too, when you come to be my age, daughter. Isn't that so, Mother Hack?"

Mrs. Hack did not hear him. Whenever voices rose and sounded as though they were saying disagreeable things, she ceased to listen and retreated to the safety of her own memories. She sat, crumbling her biscuit in her little white shakings fingers, and whispered her thoughts to herself. They saw her lips move and caught the soft swift murmur of words worn smooth and unintelligible by repetition, little stones worn smooth by the flow of the years over them, and they saw her face ripple and change as she acted some old scene over to herself. They pretended not to notice. Grandmamma was an old lady. It was taken for granted in Mamma's family that when people were old they were apt to be a little bit soft in the head. The girls looked down at their plates with pinker cheeks, and the Captain snorted to cover the silence, and Grandmamma roused and glanced round the table with faintly anxious eyes before she went on with her breakfast.

Captain Flood picked up his second cup and said, testily: "Clare! Did you think to put the cream and sugar in my coffee?" He knew that she had not. And Callie had not asked him, as she always did at breakfast, how he had slept. It upset him to have them overlook these things. He looked forward to saying: "I slept well as usual. Thank the good Lord, I have nothing to complain of there. I'm bound to say that if I am seventy-six years old I never felt better in my life. I don't think there's many men my age could say

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that. I declare I don't see why, feeling the way I do, I shouldn't have a good twenty years still coming to me." He never tired of this monologue, as he never tired of their morning solicitude. Such things made up the pleasant pattern of his day.

Now his breakfast was spoiled, and he felt it was hard when he made no demands on his women except that they be happy and baby him a little. He looked forward so to his breakfast, with his wife on one side pouring his coffee, and Callie splitting open and buttering his biscuits, and all of them waiting to hear how he had slept. Now Matty had spoiled everything by her talk of death, and at the sound of the horrible word even Callie and his wife had forgotten him. When he asked so little of them it was hard that he should have to feel neglected, or ever have to suspect that they were unhappy.

Meal-times were important to him. They were the hours around which were grouped all the other hours of the day; they were the recurrent centering and focusing of his family life. He liked to be alone at breakfast with his own little flock, his wife seated beside him so that there was no head or foot to the table, but only a circle that returned to him. At the other meals there could not be too much company to suit him.

He liked to drive home with a buggyful of unexpected guests, with another buggy following behind, from a trip to town or to a rally. Failing this, he would stand on the porch and hail a wagon going through the village, or some one passing the house on his way home to his own dinner.

The women were never forewarned if he could avoid it, for he loved the bustle of the last-minute preparations—the flying figures of Clare and the girls, the hurry in the kitchen, the sound of the end tables dragged out from the wall to lengthen the dinner table, the clatter of the silver as the places already laid were swept together and the table set

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again. He sat outside on the porch, enjoying the confusion, relishing the compliments and excuses of the visitors, pulling on his pipe, sucking in his cheeks to send a projectile of spit, threw! over the railing. It never occurred to him that this hospitality involved trouble or expense; he would have scorned to count the cost of food, or to believe that it could upset his family to have ten unexpected guests for dinner.

The improvised meal invariably did him credit. It was not for nothing that Mamma had grown up in a boarding-house, and if she was an absentminded, rattle-brained hostess at the table, she was mistress in her pantry and kitchen. With a sort of magic she would gather her forces and get the meal together.

Dell kept chickens in the little fenced-in patch outside the kitchen door, and she paid them in eggs and fresh-killed fowl for allowing her to have them there and to feed them on kitchen scraps. The garden gave them vegetables and berries in summer, and enough to put up in pickles and preserves for winter-time. Butter and milk and fruit came in from the country people. The Captain was always ready to help them in their difficulties, to give them the benefit of his knowledge of the law or of his acquaintance with the leaders of the Party. He wrote dozens of letters for them to their Congressmen in Washington. It was only natural for them to be glad to let him have all the farm and dairy truck he needed. "Lord knows," he said, "it doesn't cost 'em anything." When he drove out into the county, past the farms of folk for whom he had done a favor, he made a point of stopping by to say howdy-do and to pick up a trifle of butter or cream. "I reckon they're glad enough for me to take it off their hands," he said. "Goodness knows I could have asked for 'hard cash many a time when I took a thank-you-kindly. It isn't as if one family could eat up all they raise on a farm. It isn't in reason to suppose they could."

All he needed to buy was meat and flour and sugar and

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coffee at Lucas's in the village, and for these it was often hard to find the ready money. But the Captain could get credit even at Lucas's. It was not even in a Lucas to set himself against the Captain's bland assurance.

Captain Flood was never a man to let the thought of money stand between him and his pleasures, and now that he was old and there were only talk and gluttony and exaction left to him, he became more than ever ruthless in the work he made, and his hospitality more fierce and unflagging. He was a gregarious man, fond of company and conversation, and in these days only mealtime could supply him with both. At the table there was always his family to listen to him, if no one else, and every dish that came in and every cup of coffee could be made a subject for remark that would not escape his treacherous memory before he could get the words spoken. So it was with the anger of an injured man that he told himself that his breakfast had been ruined; but with returning optimism that there was still dinner and supper ahead, and that he would go down to the courthouse after his morning walk and surely find some one there to bring home with him for dinner.

He pushed back his chair from the table, and taking out his pipe he filled it, holding it between his spraddled knees and spilling the tobacco over himself and the carpet. Then he stood up and brushed what remained upon his clothes onto the floor. He had done this so often that he was no longer conscious of the pleasure it gave him, but satisfaction creased his cheeks in a smile like a child's, innocent and sly. The women watched him without seeing what he did, feeling only weariness and a vague displeasure, the residue of years of inward wailing: "He has scratched the table! He has burnt his coat! There is a mess to be swept up again!" Only Dell, clearing off the dishes, grumbled to herself, "I declare he's wus en a bird wid his droppin's!"

After breakfast they went out on the porch to see Bess

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drive away in Peach's buggy, and then the girls went upstairs to change their dresses and put on their hats to go for the mail. The walk this morning would be different from all other walks because Bess would not be there, and this difference was enough to raise their spirits and change the whole prospect of the day.

Every day after breakfast the girls went for the mail. Sometimes there were letters for them, and there were always newspapers and catalogues for the Captain. Ralph wrote once a month to send money home, and the postmaster stuck his letters in the window until they called for the mail, and people going by stopped and stared in at the foreign stamps and lettering. The thought of Ralph sailing in great ships to the far corners of the world and some day surely sailing home again, gave a secret hidden color to all their imaginings of the future.

When they brought the mail home and gave it over to the Captain, the girls went up to Mamma's room to talk and sew. All the life in the house centered around Mamma's room, upstairs in the back. Summer-time there was a breeze there, and in winter it could be shut up snug and tight. It was somehow different from the other rooms, the hot still air of summer stirred and lightened there, and the round oil-stove could fill every corner of it with close heavy-smelling heat. Mamma's sewing-machine was there, and the big double bed where the girls spread their goods and pinned on patterns and cut out. All day in winter they sat up there together, cutting and stitching. Old things of Mamma's and Grandmamma's and Aunt Sophie's, the Captain's old fine linen shirts, lace collars Ralph and Robert had worn as children, everything in the trunks and bureaus they mended and made over.

Mamma sat in her cushioned rocker and sometimes sewed, too. She had bits of work she was always taking up and putting down and forgetting; she had workbags and packs

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of cards scattered in every room in the house. But unlike the girls, who grew restless the moment their hands were idle, Mamma was perfectly happy doing nothing. She rocked through a morning or afternoon, her tongue running gaily on all the old gossip, and in the evenings she had her cards with the Captain or her games of solitaire. The girls liked to have Mamma with them. It seemed foolish to dream and fret with Mamma sitting there so placidly, her skirt pulled up a little to show her feet and ankles, never worrying or hoping, nor, for that matter, ever thinking at all.

When they were alone, the girls sat in long silences broken by bickering. When they were alone their thoughts grew dark and turbulent; they blamed one another fiercely and incoherently for the sameness of their lives, they lashed out at one another and at life. They needed Mamma to lull them to the knowledge that theirs was the safe and ordinary lot of women.

In winter and in bad weather, when he had looked over the mail, the Captain came up to sit with them at their sewing. Toward the middle of the morning they would hear his heavy, deliberate step on the stairs and hurry to clear the bed for him. He stretched out comfortably and they put a newspaper under his feet to save the spread. But no matter how old the paper was or how often he had read it before, something in it always caught his eye and in a moment he had it out, his elbow sunk in the clean white bolster, his heavy body in its wrinkled garments weighing down one side of the bed, his feet on the clean counterpane. He liked to be with his womenfolk. He would lie there all the rest of the morning, reading his rag of a paper, sucking his cold pipe—he never smoked upstairs—and now and then getting up and going into the little curtained alcove to spit into the commode.

In summer and on fine days he went for his walk as soon as the girls brought the mail. Today was sunshiny and clear,

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and so he set off at once for Gays Park with his papers, taking the very middle of the road and moving with the obsessed, deliberate, splay-footed walk of age so that farm wagons going in to town had to turn out of their way to pass him.

There was a bench in the grounds at Gays Park that overlooked the South Post Road and half the county. The Captain was not on good terms with Gays; he had told Edward Gay to keep off his place—he wanted no such snakes in his Eden. He thought Edward and the old man both half-crazed rackety folk, though the girl was a pert, pretty little piece and he did not mind her; but he discouraged any dealings with the family. This was not enough, however, to keep him away from his favorite seat. He came to Gays Park every fine morning and sat on the bench until dinner-time, in the full sunshine, with his newspapers in a bundle beside him. He seldom opened and read them until after his dinner, but sat in the sun, hatless, leaning forward on his stick, dozing a little and looking at the view.

The country that lay spread out below him was rocky and broken up into little hills that rose one behind the other until they met the blue line of the mountains. Red clay roads and gray barren patches where the rock broke through the thin rich soil, patterned the bright green of the fields. It was a pretty country, but it was poor land for farming, out of the path of tobacco and soft living. There had never been rich planters hereabout. As far as he could see the land had once belonged to his family and to the Gays and Weems, but they had been a simple folk, plain country people, and long before the Civil War they had parted with the greater portion of their land and farmed out what was left on shares. In this way the little settlement grew up that became a village and later on the county seat. When the Captain was a boy the courthouse was built and old Dr. Tidball came over from Melford and settled between the Floods and Gays Park, and they knew that they had founded a town. They

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called it St. Marys Village, for the old church across the road from Gays Park. A few years ago it had seemed certain that the great new highway would run past their doors and make them into a city.

The village lay along the hump of a long stony hill: first the church and the ancient stones of the little old outgrown graveyard beside it, and the big houses in their wide yards; then, around a shallow bend in the road, the single village street. On one side this was a plank sidewalk and a row of stores and meaner dwellings, and on the other an open grassy field where the school, the courthouse, the county jail, and the old frame house that was now the hotel were set back an unequal distance from the road. Beyond, the street frayed out into a scattering of Negro cabins down the easy slope of the backhill road to the station. At one time the village had been important enough for the county seat; it was directly upon the old Post Road over which the mail had gone for two hundred years, full in the path of the new highway from Washington. But the new South Post Road had turned aside before it reached the village. It ran almost up to the long hill and then broke away at the bottom and swept coldly round it, smooth and dark and glossy like water. From where Captain Flood sat the vehicles that passed along it had something of the thrill and mystery of ships.

Across the fields the Captain could see the railroad tracks, their steel rails glinting in the sun. He watched for the fast trains, to see the long line of toy cars rush by, their windows flashing, filling the air with a faint far commotion. The tracks followed the Post Road to the hill and then swung round it on the other side to meet the highway again beyond. Between them, the steep stony hill and the village and the bit of forgotten country road was an island, cut off from the country round about. Its only connection with the world was the little station at the bottom of the backhill road. No passenger trains came in there, but in passing the railroad flung

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out a grudging spur and one freight crawled into the village late at night. Every night the whistle of the mail-train as it passed the freight at the siding, the bell of the freight as it pulled into the station, the thin howling of the Negroes' dogs on the backhill road, sounded an unchanging pattern on the silence. It waked Captain Flood from his light sleep and he thought, "Ah Lord! St. Marys Village is mighty close to the big world nowadays."

The Captain sat motionless on the bench in the warm sunshine. He was an arresting figure with his straight back and thick well-brushed gray hair and the long intellectual face so common in those parts, whose vacuous nobility startled strangers from behind a mule team on the clay roads or over the counter in a country store. He watched the vehicles on the road below and thought, "There's surely a sight of traffic between some place and Melford."

He had forgotten the little fracas at breakfast-time and was, as usual, happy and content. He had had a good life; there was nothing in it to fret his old age. He had known a few sorrows only—when his mother died, when Lee surrendered, when he lost his second son, Robert, of a fever when he was eight, and last when he realized that Ralph had left home for good. The first three were long ago and blurred by the years that had come after them, and the last was tempered by pride. He had no regrets, and at his age that compensated for anything he might have missed—if indeed he had missed anything. Sins and pleasures were too distant now for him to recognize and distinguish between them. If there were ambitions he had never realized, they did not matter now; he had come to the time when age itself was achievement enough: few men as old as he were so completely master in their own house, retained such an interest in the great world, boasted such a suit of hair. He knew certainly that he had no regrets. He could savor these last years untroubled, in idleness and sun.

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As he sat on the bench he limbered his stiff fingers by playing a tattoo on the wooden seat. He was not conscious of the rhythmic sound he made nor of the hard wood under his stiffened fingers. Life had receded in him until the extremities of his body were very far away and not always even a part of him. But he felt the core of life in him hot and strong, and he thought, aloud: "I declare I don't see why people have to die. I don't see what it is that keeps 'em from going on forever."

PART TWO

MAMMA AND THE GIRLS

Chapter One

IT WAS the first week in May and the last day of the rural school. The farmers needed their children at home to help with the spring's heavy work. Bess Flood stood on the porch, waiting for the boy to bring Peach's buggy. She was alone, for since the Captain's death the rules that bound the household had relaxed a little; the girls came downstairs one by one and had their breakfast, it was no longer imperative for the whole group to gather to wave good-by to Bess.

The school was five miles out in the county and the livery-stable man loaned a horse and buggy, and Bess drove off at eight o'clock every morning and back again at four in the afternoon. There was no one on the street when she left, but at four o'clock everybody would be out. The girls would be strolling along, two or three together, and the men would be outside the post-office and on the courthouse veranda. They would bow to her and raise their hats; even the young men who loafed all day on the packing-boxes in front of Lucas's store would look up at her when she drove past. This moment was the thrilling climax to her day.

Summer had come early this year and the day was warm enough for a starched white dress and a fringed sunshade of ivory silk. Bess knew she looked her best and that Edward Gay would glance at her and smile, and Mr. Tom Weems blow her a gallant kiss. A flush came into her brown cheeks and she tapped her foot, wanting Peach's stable boy to come quickly so that she might commence and get over with the long dreary day, and drive back through the village at four o'clock.

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The school was a dirty one-room shack and it was cold and smelled of woolen clothes and dampness and feet. Bess loathed it. She hated the big loutish boys and girls who snickered and shuffled their feet, and the small ones with crusty noses who were too shy to speak aloud. The children came in tardily. They were restless with spring, and as they sat in the chilly dampness they began to sniffle with spring colds. The dirty windows turned the bright day outside to winter, and Bess shivered in her white dress and the color left her cheeks so that her face looked pinched and sallow. She heard the children their lessons, her finger marking the place in the book, thinking that she hated the school and that she could not give it up.

She had taught school for three winters and nothing had come of it. Sitting up in the high buggy showed off her figure, and the wind brought life and color to her face. In winter she had a fur collar and muff and a red velvet hat; her eyes were bright under the dashing brim and her cheeks bright above the cloudy darkness of the fur. She drove through the village twice every day and people looked up at her and the men all spoke and smiled when she went by. All the other girls envied her, and she had been so sure that long before this something would have happened. If she had been told in the beginning that after three years she must give way to Callie, she would have consented gaily.

But you couldn't really count these three years, she thought, bitterly. No one could expect much the very first year, and the next winter there was the Captain's illness and death, and after that Aunt Sophie moaning and screeching in the side yard. It was not fair to expect her to give up to Callie yet. The girls must let her have the school one more winter.

She let the children leave early. Her fingers were shaking with cold and nervousness as she untied the horse, but outside the sun was warm and bright and she felt better. She

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slapped the reins and Peach's old horse broke into a trot. The wind ruffled Bess's hair under her high-perched hat, and the brightness of the sun on the wide, shadeless road, running away so fast under the wheels, gave her a little pain between her eyes.

After they passed the livery stable at the end of the village the horse went on slowly. Bess looked down the street. There was no one in sight. Her heart contracted so she could scarcely breathe and the pain between her eyes grew sharp and bright. It was the moment she had looked forward to all day long, and there was not a soul on the street.

Bess pulled on the reins and the old horse stopped. She pressed her hand to her eyes to clear away the pain, and looked around her again. She could not believe it. Whenever she came home in the afternoon people were out on the street, and today there was no one even on the boxes in front of Lucas's. Something must have happened; she was caught in the nightmare in which a familiar place turns suddenly strange and terrible.

But she knew that she could not sit in the buggy in the middle of the road, pressing her fingers to her eyes. Some one would be sure to see her and to talk about her afterwards. People talked about the Flood girls; perhaps because there were so many of them they were somehow noticeable. Mamma often said that they must be careful now that the Captain was gone: a houseful of women was apt to be talked about, or else to be overlooked altogether. She shook the reins and clucked and the horse moved on slowly down the street.

When they went by the post-office she glanced in. There were her sisters and Nona Gay just inside the door, and through the big window she could see Mr. Tom Weems's back, huge and rounded, like an elephant in his enormous Palm Beach suit, and a group of men beyond him. They were looking over the mail. Today she had come home half

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an hour earlier than usual, and everyone in the village was in the post-office, looking over the afternoon mail.

At supper Bess had such a headache that she could not eat. She never had much appetite for supper. Mamma and the girls had dinner at two o'clock—meat and hot bread and all the vegetables there were from the garden and whatever pies and cakes were in the house. Dell, their colored woman, moved slowly and heavily all day long about the kitchen, stewing and baking and preserving. She cooked up everything in the house and put the dishes of food in rows on the pantry shelves, and something of everything she cooked Mamma and the girls had for dinner.

When Bess came home, Dell began to get out and warm over everything left from dinner, and she put the half-empty dishes with their crusted silver serving-spoons still in them on the table, in a semicircle around Bess's plate. Bess had supper at five o'clock, for she took only a cold put-up lunch, and Mamma and the girls ate with her—tea and bread and preserves and any bits of leftovers that took their fancy. This way, Dell could leave earlier and was better-humored; besides, there was no reason to bother much about supper now that the Captain was gone.

After his death the table company had dwindled and disappeared. It was no longer easy to get food from the country folk; even guests were not to be had so easily when the Captain was not there to dragoon them. At last Mamma could afford to consider Dell a little, and so avoid the days of grumbling and grudging that followed the Captain's grand impromptu festivities. The Captain would stand none of her nonsense; he would cry magnificently: "All right! If she don't want to do what we say, let her go! Get a nigger in the kitchen that's willing to work!" It was impossible to convince him that they would never find another cook like Dell. There were not many of the old kind left, ready to work for their food and a warm place in winter and little or nothing

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besides. They would not find another to cook and wash-up for twenty people, even with back talk and grumbling.

The Captain had never permitted his wife and daughters to have a life outside their own home. He was fond of company, but they were not allowed to enjoy the fruits of his lavish hospitality. Whenever an invitation came he cried: "No! No! Let them come to us! Have all the parties and visitors you want right here at home! Let people come to us!" He had been dismayed and frightened by a vision of the girls off gadding to dances while he and Mamma sat alone, of the family divided by separate and unnatural gaieties, of the circle at meal-time broken up, of himself no longer the focal-point of their existence. After he died there was no one to bring the world to them. Now weeks went by when nobody entered the house except Dell coming to her work and Grandmamma slipping up from the Office for Aunt Sophie's tray and her own hasty meals. She always hurried, for she did not like to leave Sophie even on her good days, and when Sophie was bad she did not come at all. Then Dell, grumbling, had to carry trays as well as the water and the slops. No one knew what went on at those times between the two women. Dell went no farther than the doorstep, and the others did not go near them at all. When the girls walked in that direction they crossed the street and passed the Office from the safe distance of the farther path. Sometimes they heard Aunt Sophie scream out, or moan, and then they looked away and frowned and sighed, and Mamma shut the windows on that side of the house.

This evening Bess could not eat. She sat with her elbows on the table, resting her forehead in her hands. She was sick with headache and with the nameless despair which, it seemed to her, had followed her for a long time and overtaken her at last. From time to time she put her fingers to her eyes, pressing her finger tips against the lids and drawing them down over her cheeks and throat. She had discovered the

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gesture that afternoon while she sat in the buggy in the middle of the deserted street, and it was to become habitual with her.

Mamma said, placidly, "Stop rubbing your face like that, Bessie." The girls nibbled at the broken food and pried into the secret of Bess's disturbance with their quick curious eyes. While they watched and ate they murmured that they were not hungry, somehow. They had had their dinner at two o'clock and now it was scarcely half-past five. They would have enjoyed their supper far more later on, but it did not occur to them to let Bess eat alone. Bound together as they were by the circumstances of their life, it never entered their minds to be alone.

After supper they took their sewing out on the porch.

The late spring darkness came down slowly. Dim particles sifted down and settled, softly blurring their work, imperceptibly blotting it out. Callie got up and went into the house and came back with a shawl for her mother's shoulders, and behind her Dell lit the lamp in the hall before she went home for the night. Edward Gay, coming up the front walk, could see no one but Matty, sitting on the steps where the light from the doorway just missed her and laid a bright empty path down the steps and the short walk to the gate. The whites of her eyes and her teeth shone. "She looks like a mulatto girl," he thought, and he sat down beside her. "You are four ghosts," he said into the darkness behind him. "Matty and I don't believe in your existence."

Mamma and Laura laughed indulgently.

Nobody spoke for what seemed a long time. The darkness and the silence weighed upon them, and the four women on the porch stirred restlessly and Mamma gave an uneasy titter. Callie sat nearest the door, where a faint light reached her, and they could see her leaning back in her chair with the cool backs of her hands against her forehead, pushing up the weight of her hair. Mamma asked, softly, "Another

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head?" And Callie answered with a wordless murmur of weariness and pain. Mamma said: "Callie's never been like herself since she got worn out with nursing your poor father. It would be nice if she could have a little change."

Bess cried, harshly: "Oh, for Heaven's sake, then, Callie, take the school! I'm sick of hearing you all hint and talk around it! I've had the cold and the smells and those children for three winters, and now you can take your turn and welcome!"

Callie hesitated, then she leaned toward Bess and said, quietly: "You can keep it. I think I'll just stay with Mamma, Bess. I don't think it would be right to leave Mamma now. Anyway, I like looking after the house."

Callie had given way again. Callie always gave up to the other girls, and afterwards lay on her bed, limp with headache, or moved swiftly about the house, cold and quiet and stern, pouncing upon their small faults and stinging them with her soft bitter words.

She went on, gently: "You can keep it a good long time, I reckon. Laura is still too young, and, anyway, I don't guess she's thinking about the school."

Their chairs creaked as they all turned toward Laura. Edward Gay stopped by in the evenings sometimes since the Captain died. He came often now and by himself, not just on Sunday nights with the other young people. He sat on the porch with them all and they were not sure which he came to see. Most of the time he talked to Matty, laughing and teasing her, encouraging her to show off, but there was a feeling between him and Laura.

Laura felt them looking at her, and though she was safe in the darkness, she veiled her eyes and shrugged. "I'm in no hurry," she said. Her sisters hated her for the enigmatic calmness of her voice.

Edward Gay and Matty had not spoken. Edward sat on the steps looking straight ahead, in the full path of the hall

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light, and Matty leaned to him with her eyes fixed on his face.

Laura said, suddenly, "Well, Edward ——"

He said, "Well, Laura?" He did not look around and his voice sounded as though he were laughing to himself, and she was confused and could not think how to go on.

Matty had drawn toward him out of the shadow, and now the light fell on her hair, on her face turned to him, and on the straining line of her throat. Her starched dress fell away under her throat and Bess could see the hollow between her thin breasts. Shameless! Matty was always shameless, begging for what she wanted.

Edward stirred, and Bess was obsessed with the notion that he had taken Matty's hand. She leaned forward, trembling. Her rocker creaked and the others turned, and Edward laughed and held Matty's hand up into the light. He said, "I think you have a fever."

The women swung round to him, relieved and voluble. Mamma twittered. Callie came over and put her hand on Matty's forehead: "Her head is hot."

Bess said, dryly: "Goodness knows she's been acting queer enough."

Laura said: "The trouble is she's been out again without her hat. She walks along that blazing road without a sign of anything on her head. Someday she's going to make herself really sick."

Edward went on, as though he were talking to himself: "All of you have a sort of fever—Matty most of all. I like it. I don't know but what I'd rather live with you, Matty, than Laura, if it wasn't for a lifetime."

The girls were very still, staring at him. Only Mamma did not seem to notice what he had said. He said, polite and mocking: "Mrs. Flood, your daughter Laura has done me the honor to say she'll be my wife."

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Mamma cried: "Well, Edward! Well, I do declare! I don't know what the Captain'd have said if you'd told it to him like that, but I'm bound to say I'm as happy as can be!"

She began to gather up her little rags of sewing and stuff them into her bag. She pricked her finger and, holding it up close to her eyes, she shook her head and tasted the blood daintily: "Tch tch. . . Well, son," she said, "I believe I'll go in now. The light's bad out here on the porch; we ought to think to bring out a light. But then there'd be the bugs. That must be why the Captain would never tolerate one. Well, good night. I'll go in and have a game of cards before bedtime."

It was a signal. Now they must all murmur something and slip away so Laura could be alone with her beau. But Edward forestalled them. He kissed Mamma's proffered cheek and bowed, smiling, to the girls: "Good evening, ladies." He went down the path and down the street to Lucas's store, where a light was still burning.

The women looked after him, wondering how Laura felt when he went off without a word for her. But it was difficult now to guess what Laura thought. Lately she had seemed just to accept things, like Mamma.

"I wish you joy!" Bess said. "A drunkard, and half crazy, besides!"

Mamma clucked deprecatingly. "Now I wouldn't say that, Bessie. He's a little bit flighty, maybe, and all young men drink."

They pretended not to notice Matty, who still sat on the steps, bent over, hiding her face, crying to herself.

Laura said, laughing, "Well, who are we, to talk about crazy!"

"Hush!" Mamma said, and they glanced apprehensively toward the Office.

After the Captain's death Aunt Sophie became suddenly

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quite mad. Before that it had been possible to call her simply queer; but on the very day of his funeral she had rushed out, in front of everyone, screaming and laughing and crying that she was free. Heaven knew what people thought, except, fortunately, everyone knew the Captain and all he had done for her.

Ever since that time, no one could tell when another wild fit would come upon her. Even now, as they looked, there came a low sound of moaning and whimpering from the side yard. It was not so bad in the winter when they stayed indoors and the windows were closed, but now summer was coming on again. They shivered and avoided one another's eyes. Only Bess had the hardihood to say: "It's a wonder to me one of us got a chance to marry any one, with Aunt Sophie carrying on out there."

Mamma murmured, "Hush!" again.

Matty left off crying and jumped up and flung out her arms: "I can't stand another summer of that! Somebody stop her!" She rushed into the house.

Mamma said, mildly: "Let's all go inside. We can't stay out here now. It makes it too embarrassing for the people passing by."

They went in and stood irresolute in the hall. Matty was in the parlor holding Ralph's picture up and wailing: "Oh Ralph! Come home! come home!"

Mamma said: "Tch. Now don't anybody pay any attention to her. Just let her get it out of her system."

"You all go up," Callie said. "Let me see what I can do."

She was the only one who could manage Matty, they knew that. When the other girls were in their moods and tempers Callie was quiet and calm; all of them leaned on her then. Callie looked at Laura and thought that before long she might need her, too. Laura had always held her off. Even Bess, with all her hard ways, had often given way before

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her; in her memory all such moments were like victories. But now Laura was to be married. Callie thought: "Edward Gay is a queer man. He's never acted much like a lover should toward Laura. It isn't likely he'll make her happy." At this the heaviness that had weighed upon her spirit from the moment she refused Bess's offer of the school lifted, and she moved toward Matty, contented and serene.

Chapter Two

SUMMER was the best time of the year in the village. The farmers round about worked hard all through the year. Their farms were small and poor; like the farm women, they were worn out with too much bearing, with the feeding of families that were too large with too short a time between the generations. But they still flushed with a haggard loveliness in the spring and grew through the summer to their autumn fruitfulness. People and land were spent, but in the hot months they took on fresh vitality.

The summers were long and hot. The sun poured down and the earth steamed or baked, and in the village no one went out on the street, except at mail-time, from noon until after dark. All through the blazing week the shadeless street lay deserted, like a gray snake flattened in the hot dust. Saturday nights and Sundays it came alive. Farm hands came in to walk up and down the street, to look at the stores and the girls, and to talk and drink in company. It was an undertaking to hitch up and drive to Melford, twelve miles away. That was only for great occasions, for Election Day and the Horse Show and the Tri-State Fair. Saturday after supper the men washed up and changed their clothes and walked in to the village. On the road they passed the young girls walking in bands, their arms around one another. Passing, they laughed and called out and looked back over their shoulders and were stirred by a brief significant happiness.

Two or three times during the summer there were church festivals. All the young people came, and the farmers' wives with their children, and the old folk; and after supper there

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was a dance in the high-school building. The church ladies made the supper. The Flood girls brought cake and light rolls and their famous pickles. They were excited and happy for days before the festival, but when the time came they had their supper together with Nona Gay and Maude Tidball, a little apart from the jolly, noisy groups of country people. At the dance they waltzed with Edward Gay and Hugh Tidball and Mr. Tom Weems; sometimes a solid farmer, one of the Bissells or Tabbs or Whipples, the father of a family of young people, circled with them decorously, and the other boys and girls watched them shyly and left a little open space around them on the floor.

By half-past ten on Sunday morning the road was choked for a quarter of a mile on each side of the church by wagons and buggies filled with old people and women with little babies. The children had walked in early to Sunday school and the young folk came with them to loiter on the street in little giggling low-voiced groups. Callie and Bess and Laura and Maude Tidball taught the Sunday-school classes of brown farm children in the cool empty church, but Matty and Nona Gay walked up and down the village street, eyeing the stolid country boys who dared only to grin shyly at them and touch their hats.

On Sunday afternoons in the summer the young men gathered in the doorway of Peach's livery stable at the end of the street, and the country girls in their bright Sunday dresses buzzed around them. Clyde Cover, who did odd jobs for Peach and had a little repair shop of his own in the stable, was the center of the crowd of men, and when the Flood girls and Maude and Nona went by with their flowers for the cemetery, he stared at them boldly with his brown thick-lashed eyes. Matty and Nona called out to him, pertly, "Good evening, Mr. Clyde Cover!" They did not look at him when he answered, but walked on quickly, squeezing each other's arm and giggling.

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All along the shady road to the cemetery the girls caught glimpses of courting couples leaving the road for the little paths among the trees, and looked after them secretly. "What if we should run into Laura and Edward!" And they blushed and tittered.

All their jealousy of Laura had passed, and they were gay and light-hearted. Laura was to be married, and surely that meant that there was a chance for them all. There would be the wedding and the parties beforehand. After the wedding there would be a dance to which the whole countryside was invited; there was no telling who would be there, for people from Melford would drive over, and relatives come from as far as Richmond and Norfolk.

The girls all had pretty new clothes for the first time in their lives. When Mainma wrote to John Hack to tell him of Laura's engagement, he sold a lot he had in Melford and sent her a thousand dollars. He had bought the lot through Captain Flood years before when the Raphael knitting-mills and the talk about apples made it seem certain that land around Melford would increase in value. At that time the Captain was in the real-estate business. "Lord knows," he said, "if anybody can sell property in this section I ought to. I know this whole part, hill and valley, like the palm of my own hand. It looks to me like a real opportunity for us all."

But things had not moved fast enough for a man like the Captain, and after a few sales he lost interest and stopped paying on the two or three lots he had bought for himself. "Better let it go," he told John Hack. "I reckon that hereabouts we are due to keep on poor like God made us."

After twenty years John Hack got fifteen hundred dollars for the land he had bought for five hundred; just about what he would have had, with taxes and interest, if he had kept his money in the bank. But he did not look at it that way. It seemed to him that he had made a thousand dollars through Alec Flood and that he owed his daughters some-

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thing. He wrote his sister: "I've got my money back, which is more than I ever expected to do, and the profit is for the girls. Five hundred for Laura and five for the next one to get married."

Mamma said what was the use of holding on to the money when nobody knew how long it would be before another one was married, and, after all, when the time came they were sure to find the money somewhere. Things must be nice for Laura. It would never do to skimp now, and the other girls might as well have something, too.

Ralph sent a hundred dollars, but Mamma did not think this was enough, and she wrote to him and borrowed another hundred. Laura demurred. "We haven't seen Ralph for so long," she said. "We don't know but what he might have something else to do with his money." But Mamma said, pshaw! would somebody kindly tell her what a young man could spend his money on more important than his own sister's wedding?

Every moment of the summer was delightful. Even Aunt Sophie was not there to mar their pleasure. Soon after Laura's engagement, Mamma wrote to John Hack and he made all the arrangements. They came down from Staunton and took her away at five o'clock one morning before anyone was about. Only Grandmamma, gentle and deaf, a pretty old lady who was really a credit to them, was in the Office now, and the girls' glances no longer strayed toward it nervously when they went past it on a walk or sat out on the front porch with company. They went about together, laughing and talking and holding one another's waists. Matty no longer cried in her room and even Bess was sweet-tempered with the gay summer ahead and the certainty of the school again next winter. Sunday evenings, when Edward Gay and Mr. Tom Weems and Hugh Tidball came by, they were full of teasing and high spirits.

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Week after week, miraculously, nothing fell below their expectation. Everyone sent presents. Everyone gave parties for Laura. Nona Gay had a dance at Gays Park and invited everyone she had ever heard of—people from Melford and boys and girls from the farms all over the county. She said, "What difference does it make who they are as long as there are lots of people?"

Mr. Tom Weems gave a dance, too, a splendid affair with a hired orchestra from Melford and his second wife's sister from White Point to act as hostess, and strange stylish young folk from all the near-by towns.

Early in June, Leonard Wilson came to the village, a new young man to go on picnics and to beau the girls to parties and to lend to even ordinary evenings a thrilling new enchantment.

They saw him one evening standing on the porch of Lucas's hotel across the road, his hands in his pockets, looking up and down the street and whistling. A moment later he came toward them. He ran down the long wooden steps of the hotel and across the road and in at their gate, slight, alert, sandy-haired, incredibly alive.

"I'm Leonard Wilson," he told them, addressing himself to Mamma with his charming ingenuous smile. "I'm from down at the University."

He sat on the top step and let his smile embrace them all. "That is, I'm really from Louisville, Kentucky, but you know what I mean. I go to school at the University and this summer I'm going to try to make some money instead of going home. You can't work at home; there's too much going on and folks are too nice to you. You all know anyone I know in Louisville?"

He told them that he planned to stay there most of the summer. He would sell paint for one firm and aluminum kitchenware for another. Neither paid him a salary, but he

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would get a big commission on everything he sold, so it was up to him to hustle. He thought he could make a good thing of it. "Don't you all think it kind of looks like they could use some paint and aluminum pots around here? Not right here, of course; I mean out yonder in the country. Do you know where I can get hold of a horse and buggy? I want a good rig—I mean by that good and cheap!" He laughed, and they laughed, too. It was impossible not to be attracted to his youth and vitality and good humor.

"I'm not working this town," he explained, laughing. "Just the farms out where people have a hard time getting in to the stores. So you don't have to be scared of me trying to sell you anything. That is, anything but myself. That's what I came over to see if I could do."

He had seen his room at the hotel and he had eaten two meals there with the station master and the clerks from the stores, and he knew he would not stay. He had been pleasant and polite, for there is never any sense getting people down on you, but he would not stay there if he could help it. That afternoon he talked to old Mrs. Lucas on the back porch while she fixed the vegetables for supper, asking questions about people to see if there was anyone likely to take him in, and dropping a hint that he had not enough money to board at the hotel.

"I know you wouldn't do this for everyone," he said now to Mamma. "I have a nerve, I guess, thinking you might be willing to do it for me. But I heard you had a son away from home and I thought maybe you might let me have his room. I'd be a man around the house," he said. "I could help in lots of ways, I bet. There's things ladies just have to have a man to do for them, and I'm grand at waiting on ladies. My mother and sisters saw to that, all right! And you'd just about be saving my worthless life. Honestly, it'd be mighty sweet of you."

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They showed him Ralph's old room, at the end of the hall and down a couple of steps. It was just the room for a man, next door to the bathroom and down the stairs, so that it was a little apart from the rest of the house. Leonard looked at the big dim room, full of dark heavy furniture—a double bed, a big carved mahogany wardrobe, a marble-topped washstand. On the black uneven floorboards were round stiff bright rag rugs. "Gee! it's gloomy as hell!" he thought. "Anyway, it's better than the hotel. Now if they just have decent food—women by themselves eat kind of skimpy. Still, they're liable to make a fuss over a man." Aloud he said, ingenuously: "Say, this is great. This is something like. This is just exactly like home."

Len Wilson was a nice boy, always pleasant and good-humored. They were never sorry for a minute that they had taken him in. He, more than anything else, more even than the parties and Laura's wedding, made that summer memorable.

At first he drove off every morning in his hired buggy and did not come back all day. But little by little he began to spend most of his time with the girls. He hated to miss the big noonday meal, and after he began to come home for that it seemed foolish to start out again. Besides, he did not need the money. Nothing was ever said about his paying board and he did not like to mention it, so what the family sent him and what he made on the road was velvet.

He liked the girls and he went out of his way to be nice to them. He felt that he had done well for himself that summer. Of course the village was only a little two-by-four sort of place, but with Dell's cooking and four pretty girls to make over him and every cent he got velvet, he sometimes felt he could stay there the rest of his life. When he grew tired of being so much with women, he could hang around with Edward Gay or sit in Mr. Tom Weems's office at the bank, swapping stories.

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For a long time he divided himself impartially among the girls, finding it as agreeable to give pleasure to one as to another; but after Laura's marriage late in August everything seemed different. The wedding and the parties and the excitement left all of them feeling different. There was not a girl who had not been kissed at the dance on the wedding night. Kisses were rare in the village where men were so few that any love-making was noticeable and apt to lead to marriage; and these kisses of strangers, fleeting and sweet and casual, were a heady wine. Leonard liked the sister who came up from Norfolk for the wedding—Agnes was her name. She seemed more like the girls he was used to at home and at the university. After an evening with her he could not get back to his easy brotherly feeling for the others. On the porch evenings he moved restlessly about, sitting by first one and then another, talking in soft asides to the girl nearest to him, restless and seeking.

The wedding festivities were over, but there was a sultry aftermath of gaiety. It was hard to believe that Laura was married and people had come to the wedding and gone away and nothing was changed for them; the girls could not bear to admit that it was over and dismiss it into the past. Nona Gay and Maudie Tidball came over after supper, and the men dropped by every evening and stayed very late. Mr. Tom Weems, in a fresh white suit, eased himself down on the top step where he had a good view of the ankles and started the talk. Hugh Tidball, home from medical school, drifted in like a thin brown leaf and yearned inarticulately in a corner. Len Wilson talked and laughed with everybody, but his eyes had grown ardent and questioning.

The summer was at its hottest and heaviest. At night they could not sleep for the heat and the moonlight was as bright as sunshine. The starved earth was bearing again and for a little while was rich and fruitful. The little hard sweet

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peaches were ripe and they sat out on the porch eating them until late at night, waiting for it to cool off, talking less and less, until the only sound was Mr. Tom Weems spouting like a great white whale in the silver darkness. .

Callie could have taken Len Wilson for herself then, if she had liked. He preferred her, he thought; she did not look so strange and dark and stormy as the others, with her sweet pale face and her brown hair smoothly parted and her dazzled, short-sighted soft gray eyes.

The girls saw Len bring his chair closer to Callie's and follow her into the house and out again. It gave Callie a sharp, sweet pleasure to know that they saw him wanting her and to refuse him. She told herself that he belonged to all of them and that it would not be fair for her to take him away. When he moved near to her on the porch and when he wandered after her when she went inside to get something for Mamma, she pretended not to notice. She saw him falter and hesitate, and she tasted the bitter, ecstatic sweetness of self-sacrifice. She told herself that she was fine and loyal and that not one of her sisters would have been so in her place.

Bess thought, "Callie is being a martyr again." She did not care. In the evenings she sat among the others, very still, holding in check her small, hard, eager body, waiting until he should grow tired of running after Callie. .

But Matty was too quick for her. Matty did not wait until he was discouraged by Callie's coldness. She left her chair near Mamma and went to sit on the top step by Mr. Tom Weems, at Leonard Wilson's feet. She flirted gaily with the fat elderly man beside her, leaning forward to smile into his face and throwing back her head with laughter at his sly gallantries. She forced them all to notice her. Little by little the talk and laughter died away; the porch was quiet except for the fat flattered sallies of Mr. Tom Weems and Matty's high audacious laughter. When she bent for-

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ward her body was a straining arc under her thin dress, and when she threw back her head to laugh, Len saw the white flash of her eyes and teeth and felt her hair brush his knee. One evening when he followed Callie into the house Matty went in, too, and she and Leonard did not come back on the porch that evening.

The summer's unnatural gaiety was over.

Matty and Len Wilson sat together on the narrow bench around the corner of the house, and all evening no one saw or heard them. Hugh Tidball drifted dumbly away. Nona and Maude no longer came over every night after supper to listen to Mr. Tom Weems's gallant spouting, and he began to appear less often and finally did not come at all. Bess and Callie were left alone with Mamma. And after a little while Mamma would go in for her game of cards or down to the Office to sit with Grandmamma, and the two of them would be alone together. "My life, my whole life," Bess thought, desperately. "Just sitting here with Callie. The two old maids, the two Misses Flood, left high and dry together!" She thought of Grandmamma, alone now in the Office in the corner of the yard. She did not come up to the house any more, and Dell took her trays down to her and saw if she wanted anything. Sometimes Mamma went down, and sometimes the girls remembered to visit her. She sat in her little sitting-room all day long, her hands folded and fumbling in her lap, and a smile coming and going on her face. When they came in she smiled at them and tried to talk, but her mind wandered and her voice, now that she had grown so deaf, trembled away into a soundless whispering. Soon she forgot them and they went away. She seemed quite happy. Bess thought: "You can get used to anything. After a while nothing matters." But it did not comfort her. The most intolerable thought of all was that she would some day come to acquiescence.

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Callie and Bess sat in silence, and around the corner of the house, on the hard narrow bench against the house wall, Len Wilson and Matty were silent, too. The two silences beat upon each other, separate and hostile. Bess thought that if she went to the edge of the porch she would feel them meet and that it would be like being at the center of a storm.

Chapter Three

FALL came and it was time for Leonard Wilson to go back to the University. The house was very quiet, and the village was quiet, too. There were no more porch parties and church festivals. Mamma and the girls were busy with the last preserving and pickling, drying fruit, storing carrots and turnips and potatoes and barrels of apples and hard green pears in the shallow cellar under the kitchen, making ready for the long siege of winter. A few men still came in to town on Saturday nights, but after church on Sunday the street was empty now, while farmers and hands slept off the week's exhaustion. When the hurried fall work was done each household would draw in to itself behind the closed doors and windows that shut out the cold, and the village and the country round about begin to go toward their winter death.

The Floods closed off the big chill parlor from the rest of the house. In the evening they sat in the dining-room around the stove, and the door into the kitchen was kept open, and the door to the house shut all day long. There was a stove in Mamma's room, too, and no other heat in the house. The girls dressed and undressed shivering, and ran shivering through the halls from Mamma's room to the dining-room and back. Even with the parlor and the extra bedrooms closed off, the draughts that blew in through the windows and under the doors kept the house like ice.

Mrs. Hack came up from the Office, for Dell could not be going out in the cold to build fires and carry food. She slept with Mamma in the Captain's big bed, and as soon as the dining-room was warm in the morning she came down to

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settle herself in a chair by the stove, where she stayed until bedtime. She sat far back, almost behind the stove, to be out of the way, and held her hands clasped tightly in her lap to conceal their trembling. She talked to herself under her breath and looked up now and then with her faint questioning smile. She was so far withdrawn from life that she was unconscious of almost everything around her, but the instinct to efface herself, to conceal the trembling of her hands, and to speak softly would continue strong in her until her death.

Bess began her fourth winter of teaching the country school.

She was handsome and spirited in her red hat and dark furs, calling out to people and waving as she whipped her old horse through the village, the wheels of the buggy skimming over the frozen road. She was so gay and talkative on Sunday evenings when there was company that the other girls involuntarily gave way before her. In her heart she thought: "Twenty-five. I'm twenty-five. The end of youth. And the end of youth is the beginning of old age for women." These thoughts had passed out of her mind and into her heart, where they had worn a soreness, so that she often pressed her hand into her breast to ease the pain.

One day in November, the day of the first deep snow, Bess passed Clyde Cover on the road when she was going home. He bent over, his thin cotton shirt wet with snow and sticking to his back in the bitter wind, and rubbed snow on his face. He took up a handful of snow like soapsuds and washed his face, and the cold wind flattened his wet shirt against his stooping back.

Bess stopped the buggy and went back and took him in. He was hot with some fever and he sat by her, loosening his collar, the icy water trickling down his face. He said, laughing, "Only time I ever been too hot." By and by he

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slipped off the seat onto the floor of the buggy and lay huddled against her knee.

\ Mamma put him to bed in Ralph's room and Callie ran to call Hugh Tidball to come over. He had pneumonia and could not be moved. It seemed natural to have a man in the house again. Callie looked after him in the daytime, but when she got home from school he belonged to Bess. She looked forward to giving him his supper and seeing that he was comfortable for the night: she liked to wash his face and his strong hot hands and to comb his black moist hair and to draw his covers up smoothly and to feed him with a spoon like a child.

She had the little room on the hall that was nearest his. At night when he was restless she sat up in bed with her plait hanging down between her thin shoulders and listened. Sometimes she slipped in, muffled in Ralph's old dressing-gown, and moved about the room, straightening his bed, feeling his forehead, bringing him a drink. Bess was a thin, active girl with a dark down on her upper lip and very full bright eyes. With her hair combed back from her high forehead and hanging down her back in a thick tail, she looked almost like a little girl.

When Clyde was better and could go downstairs, the other women grew fond of him, too. "He's a good, quiet boy," Callie said. "You'd never believe that kind of boy could be so quiet and gentlemanly in his manners." Mamma said half a dozen times a day: "I declare it's nice to have him here. I always did miss a man smell around the house." And Mrs. Hack peeped up at him and smiled and once or twice put out her hand shyly and touched him when he went by.

Clyde lay on the couch in the dining-room and spent the day contentedly with the two old ladies. He kept his soft brown eyes fixed on Mrs. Hack as she mumbled to herself and said, "Yes'm. Yes, ma'am," every so often in his soft voice. He waved a slow rhythm with his foot to the creak

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of Mamma's rocker, or, raised on his elbow, looked on at her game of solitaire. She taught him rummy and hearts, and in the evenings the girls sat around the dinner table and they played for matches.

When he grew stronger he followed Callie lazily about her work, and she gave him little things to do for her—the coffee to grind and the knives to clean and sharpen. He liked best of all to sit in the warm busy kitchen with its smells and clatter and watch Callie and the colored woman, Dell, as they stirred about. They were glad to have him there, sitting quietly in a corner out from under their feet, doing so docilely the small tasks they set him, and now and then looking up to show his white teeth in a smile. "He's like a big ole dawg," Dell said. "Like ole dawg or cat he don't trouble nobody. Feed him and give him warm place to lay down and leave him be, that's all. He's company for me in the kitchen same as a big ole cat."

Only Matty did not care for Clyde. "Shucks!" she said. "The fuss you all make over Peach's stable hand! Eating at the table and all. I'd just like to see Papa's face!"

Matty thought of nothing but her letters from Leonard Wilson, running down to the post-office for them twice a day in every sort of weather, and reading them off in a corner and then thrusting them shamelessly into the bosom of her dress. When she leaned over the envelope crackled under her blouse and she put up her hand and pressed the stiff corners into her breast. She was the youngest of them all and she already had a beau, a real serious beau, down at the University. Let the others get what pleasure they could out of fussing over Clyde Cover, a common boy, an odd-job man who fixed up farmers' broken plows and buggies, a stable hand of Peach's! She said to herself, let them have him! But she could not resist flaunting her contempt.

Laura and Nona Gay often came over after supper, running in wrapped up in old coats and scarves, bringing a cur-

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rent of fresh chill air into the close, heated room. When they came, Clyde rose and went upstairs. They always cried: "Now why are you running off again, Mr. Clyde Cover? We're honestly going to be mad if you run off!"

Clyde laughed. "I'm a sick boy, ladies. I'm under strict doctor's orders to get me my full sleep!"

After he had gone they took out their sewing.

Laura was going to have a baby in May, and she was already lacing herself in, pulling her corsets tight and smoothing her clothes down over them anxiously. She felt ashamed at the thought of people seeing the physical change in her. She was sure it was not nice to show so early; women would look at her and speculate and count the months on their fingers until her time came. It was fortunate that it was winter and she could bundle up, but she looked forward with dread to the coming months. In a little while she would be ashamed for her unmarried sisters to see her. When she undressed at night there were red marks on her body from the laces and she was often sick and giddy from the pressure of her corsets; but she minded the discomfort far less than the mortification her unlaced figure would have caused her. Her modesty was outraged to think that soon, no matter what pains she took, everyone would be able to see plainly what only she had any right to know.

The girls were excited and curious. They exclaimed over the old patterns Mamma brought out, and they chose the ones they wanted to make up with little cooing cries. They told Laura not to worry, that they would do all her sewing, and she made herself say, smiling, "I'll do the same for you some day," and they laughed and blushed.

One evening Nona Gay brought over her best yellow dress and Matty tried it on. She walked up and down, looking into the sideboard mirror, rubbing her cheeks and biting her lips to bring out the color and fluffing her hair up with her fingers. "I'm going to wear this to midyears at the

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University. Len asked me. You'll all have to let me pick and choose among your clothes."

Nona jumped up and whirled Matty round in a waltz: "You look just lovely, honey! You must find a beau for me, Matty, and next year we'll go down together!" She stopped and flung out her arms. "Oh, I'm glad I'm young yet! Listen you all. If I don't get married by the time I'm twenty-five, I'll die. I'll kill myself! Rather than be an old maid I'd marry a nigger and live on the backhill road!"

Mamma rapped sharply with her thimble. "Hush your mouth, Nona Gay!"

Nona said: "There ought to be a rule for women to kill themselves or go into a convent or something if they're not married at twenty-five. That would be nice for us, wouldn't it, Matty? We're lots and lots the youngest of us all!"

She danced Matty down the room, and Mamma said, "If I did what I ought, I'd send you home!" The other girls looked on with little acid smiles.

At Christmas-time Leonard Wilson sent Matty a box of candy with a card in it, just a card printed with his name. She did not hear from him again.

January passed, and February. The midyear dances were certainly over now. Matty locked herself in her room and wept and refused the food Callie carried up to her three times a day. Afterwards, when that spell had passed, she was not like herself. She spent most of the day in bed in her cold room, and when she got up she dragged herself about the house, silent and pale.

It was a long winter and bitterly cold. Mrs. Hack began to fail. She said the cold had got into her bones and that no matter how close to the stove she sat she could not get warm. At last she stayed in bed, shivering under the heavy covers, and Mamma's room was not aired even when Dell brushed up and straightened the bed. Mamma said: "I declare the room's like a rabbit-hutch, but I be-

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lieve it would be as much as poor Mother's life is worth to let in a breath of air."

Bess was glad to get out of the house in the morning. Every day when she drove down the road and felt the air cold and fresh on her face and sharp in her nostrils and between her lips, she thought: "It isn't so bad, really, It's just all of us cooped up together ——"

She did not pass many people on the road these cold days, but those she did called out to her, turned loud and cheerful by the keen weather and the thin bright tinsel of winter sunshine. Bess smiled and waved and drove on, light-hearted. Anything might happen, she thought, gaily, feeling the cold on her face and the buggy skimming over the hard smooth frozen road. Oh, she could not have endured the long dragging day at home!

The evenings were not bad, although they missed Laura and Nona. Laura was afraid of slipping on the ice, and of course Nona could not come from Gays Park at night alone. But sometimes Mamma went over in the evening and she and Edward Gay walked Laura up and down the porch between them, so that she might get a little air and exercise. When Mamma came home she brought Nona to spend the night, to be company for Matty. Nona would have a pile of music and old magazines for them, and they gathered around the piano that had been brought into the dining-room for the winter. Callie played and they sang, trying over the new music. Clyde stayed downstairs, now that Laura did not come, and he sang with them. He had a fine ringing voice, but the new words were difficult for him to read; he peered at the music, mouthing the words like a child, and the girls smiled and nudged one another.

Occasionally Hugh Tidball and Maude came to spend an evening. It was Hugh's first winter of practice, and the girls teased him, calling him Dr. Tidball and questioning him about his patients. Maude said, proudly: "Oh, he

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won't be around here long for you all to make fun of. Next year he's going up to Baltimore, or anyway the year after." Hugh said, quietly, "A couple of years of general practice won't hurt me any." "'Practice!'" his sister cried, scornfully. "Most of it with cows in the barnyard!" Hugh Tidball laughed and colored. "Now, Maude. You can't blame a farmer for not wanting to trust his critters to Smiley. Next time maybe he'll call me in for himself. Anyway, I kind of like animals."

It was late in March and still the cold weather had not broken. Winter was always long, but this year it seemed that it would never end. The last of the apples and carrots were gone and there was not a drop of milk to be had. Laura could scarcely get about. She was heavy and miserable, and the women whispered that the child would not live, for it was more than seven months and she had never felt life. The girls still sewed for her, dutifully and apathetically. Baby clothes were something different to work on, and she could always use them for her second child. Everyone was half sick and irritable, worn out by the heavy, changeless diet and the close hot air and the long dullness of winter. Only Clyde did not seem to change. Coming home from school Bess thought: "I couldn't hardly face the supper table tonight if it wasn't for Clyde being there." And in the evenings, playing cards at the table, Mamma would reach over and pat his hand. "Son, it's a real pleasure to have you in the house."

It was at this time they heard the news of Agnes's marriage. John Hack wrote to say that she had married a doctor in the Navy, a widower with two children, and that the wedding had been very quiet. The girls heard Mamma read the letter silently, looking away from one another. Their comment upon it was hurried and perfunctory, a murmured something before they made an excuse to go off alone. Agnes's marriage was something they had looked

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forward to like Ralph's coming home. They thought she would have a big wedding and they would be bridesmaids; they would go to Norfolk and stay with their rich cousins and anything at all might happen.

Late that night Matty came into Bess's room. She ran toward her in the dark crying: "Bess! Bess! You've got to let me have the school next year! You've got to!" She flung herself on the bed, weeping, and Bess, moved and startled, put her arms around her and promised anything she wanted.

Matty could not stop crying and she was icy cold, as though for a long time before she came in she had walked about her room or lain outside the covers on her bed. Bess could do nothing with her and she grew frightened and called the others. When Matty saw them all gathered round her she began to scream.

The girls were frantic and Mamma stood in the doorway, helpless and shivering and still half asleep. "Well, I don't know what in the world Matty will think up next! The Tidballs will think that poor Sophie's back."

Callie went to Clyde's door and called him, and Mamma, reassured, said, pacifically: "Now, Bess. Now, children. He'll surely know what to do."

Clyde asked them: "Have you got any liquor in the house? It would get her warmed up anyway. Haven't you anything in the house you could give her?"

Mamma said: "There's a little peach brandy in my cupboard. It seems like a shame to use it up on Matty."

Clyde poured out a good dose of the brandy and Matty drank it, and in a few minutes she let him take her back to her room.

She lay awake a long while, warm and drowsy and a little light in her head. Her body and mind were emptied by the scene she had just made, and instead of fatigue the brandy filled her with a warm, comforting glow. Her thoughts hovered round the school and some of the older boys she had

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seen on the street. She and Nona Gay liked to walk up and down, showing themselves off in their Sunday clothes, feeling like princesses beside the gawky country girls. Sometimes the boys' stares were bold when she and Nona passed them on the street, but they were young and it was easy to make their eyes fall. Matty lay still and thought of herself teaching these boys every day in school, queening it among them, breaking their silly country hearts with her smiles and her daintiness—her white hands and her small waist and the small, light, brittle bones of her wrists and ankles. She would make Peach let her have a riding-horse and she would contrive a habit. Len had told her about girls who fox-hunted. She could feel herself taking hedges and fences, light and secure; she could hear the baying of hounds, and she had a quick glimpse of the streaking red body of the fox. She was far from the school and Peach's quiet old horses. Her mind was full of bright broken pictures of the things Len had told her. For the first time she thought of him without pain, and her thoughts of him were as real and satisfying as his near presence. She was relaxed and comfortable in the warm bed and full of a queer confused happiness, and after a while she fell asleep.

Chapter Four

AT LAST the winter broke.

The first warm day Clyde went down to Lucas's store and sat on a packing-box in the sun. A week later he left the Floods' and went back to his place in Peach's stable.

Bess saw him every day in the village. He did odd jobs for Peach and he had a small business of his own repairing farm machinery in a corner of the livery stable, but most of the time he loafed in the sun outside Lucas's. He was a big, handsome fellow and the country girls always found something to say to him. When they walked on he followed them lazily with his eyes. He had an easy time with women; he did not have to go out of his way to get what he wanted. When the other men who hung around Lucas's store asked him about Matty Flood and Nona Gay, he shook his head, laughing. "Ask somebody else. Somebody that knows. I keep clear of those sort; I get my fun without running after them. Me, I'm not looking for trouble."

Miss Bess and Miss Callie were different. They were girls about his own age, but he did not think of them that way; they were ladies, and whenever they passed he smiled and touched his hat politely. Sometimes he stood, holding his battered felt hat against his hip, and talked with Bess a minute, but often he would be laughing and bragging with the loungers in front of Lucas's, and when she spoke would give her a quick, polite, puzzled smile, and his eyes would flick hers coldly like a stranger's. When this happened her heart went heavy like a stone in her breast. With her way of translating her emotions into physical sensation, she

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could feel her heart gather and weigh, cold and smooth and heavy like a stone, in her side, constricting her breath; and she would stop and press her hand hard against it, lifting, to ease the weight.

Laura had her baby in May. It was stillborn and she was very ill and Callie went over to Gays Park to nurse her. Nona came to stay with Matty and they slept together in Matty's room, and Bess could hear them whispering for hours after they went to bed. They stayed awake, whispering and giggling, and Bess stayed awake and listened. She hated the younger girls fiercely; they could make no plans that did not conspire against her. She tossed herself about, thumping her pillow, sitting up in bed to pull the bedclothes straight. She could think of but one thing. She had promised the school to Matty, but she must manage to keep it another year. She could not give it up and sit at home all day with Mamma and Callie and Dell shuffling in the kitchen and Grandmamma dying upstairs. Five years was a long time, she knew, longer than she could have it by rights, but then there was no one to come after Matty. Matty could have it the rest of her life if she liked after Bess gave it up. Surely she had a claim on it for one more winter. What could Matty do if she refused her? Would she dare to try for it herself, go to Mr. Tom Weems and tell him and persuade him to let her have it? She would never 'dare to come out against Bess before the whole village!

Bess sat up in bed and rapped on the wall and cried, "Are you two going to jabber all night!" The whispering next door changed to smothered laughter, and Bess lay down again, on her back, staring into the darkness, the bedclothes thrown off and her body rigid and hot with anger.

Nona and Matty were always together now. They slipped off in the morning and were gone all day, and when they came home they were flushed and secret. Bess talked to Callie and Mamma: "What do you suppose they are up

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to?" All Callie's thoughts were taken up with Laura, and she cried: "For Heaven's sake, Bess! One at a time is all you can expect me to worry over!" And Mamma said: "There's no accounting for the young ones, in the spring of the year especially. Lord knows, Bess, you were full of notions, too, in your day."

"In my day!" Bess cried, furious. "Anybody'd think I was a thousand!"

Once when Bess was walking with the two younger girls she saw Ivy Lucas standing in the doorway of his store, watching them. Their eyes met and he gave her a long, insolent stare and turned to say something to the man beside him. Bess saw it was young Willy Peach who had worked for Mr. Tom Weems before he married a widow and got a good farm of his own. Both young men looked at the girls and grinned, and Matty and Nona giggled. Bess was outraged. She grew hot at the thought of Nona and Matty and their goings-on—walking the street at all hours, even after dark, like colored girls with the evening off, making themselves cheap! Making them all cheap, so that men like Ivy Lucas and Willy Peach dared to look at them like that!

She was not like Nona and Matty when, sometimes, if she did not see Clyde in front of Lucas's, she walked down past Peach's livery stable. If Clyde was working she could see him through the open doorway. Sometimes he raised his head when she went by and looked after her, and his face was dark and shining with grease and sweat and his black hair lay in wet strands on his forehead.

Clyde knew she saw him, but when he looked up she pretended not to see him and this made him angry. He would brush his hair back with his wrist and look after her, muttering, before he went back to his work. He began to think of Bess sometimes while he worked and to watch for her to come past.

One day he ran into her as she came out of Lucas's. For

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an instant they were close and her eyes looked straight and surprised into his eyes. Had it been any other woman Clyde would have smiled and have managed to put something into his smile to make her aware of the nearness of their bodies. But now he reddened and touched his hat and walked away swiftly. After a few steps he looked back and saw Bess looking after him, and both of them turned their heads quickly.

Clyde walked on down the street, through the village, and out into the open country road. Suddenly he stopped and laughed. He did not know why he laughed. Then he cut a switch from the bushes beside the road and went on, whistling and switching his leg. After this the sight of Bess no longer made him obscurely angry. He stopped his work when she came by and looked after her openly, smiling.

Late in August Ralph Flood came home. He had told no one he was coming and the girls had gone out. Bess and Callie were at a meeting of the King's Daughters, and Edward Gay had driven Nona and Matty to Melford to fetch a woman he had heard of, a practical nurse who was strong and willing and cheap, to stay with Laura through the fall and winter until her second child was born. Half-way into town they passed Ralph whirling along in a hired carriage in a cloud of dust, and wondered who he could be.

The colored driver walked his horses up the long steep hill and down the road past the church and the big houses. Ralph looked about him, and everything he saw was forlorn and forgotten, everything small and shabby and covered with the thick white summer dust. The colored man found the house and tied up to the iron post in front, and Ralph got out carefully and looked up and down the street.

He was a handsome, dapper little man, a head shorter than his sisters, and already stout. He was like Mamma, he and Agnes—small-boned and plump, with something neat and birdlike about them; they were the only Hacks among the children. He took off his panama and showed a bald pink

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forehead with a thick fringe of dark curling hair. He was dressed in a white silk suit he had brought back from China, with something about him a trifle foppish for civilian taste. He had the air, common to officers in the Army and Navy, of a man who chooses his clothes to impress his inferiors. He stood still and looked about him as though he inspected a new billet. He told himself without emotion that he had come home. The dirt road, the plank sidewalk, the unpainted wooden shanties that served for stores, even the bold naked red brick of the state-built school and jail that had not been there when he left home, were all familiar: it might have been any one of a hundred straggling hamlets in any part of the world. To save his life he could feel nothing but: "Gad! I shouldn't like to be stationed here!"

He went up the short front path and through the open door into the hall. When he felt the cool dampness of the house he breathed deeply. "Ahh! Well, this is better, at any rate." He wiped his face carefully and put the silk handkerchief neatly back in his breast pocket. He hesitated; somehow he had not thought of no one there to meet him. Then he went into the kitchen and told Dell to call his mother. "Don't tell her who it is," he cautioned her. He had made up his mind to take them by surprise, and for some reason the intention outlasted his desire to be there and all his other plans. •

He sat in the parlor, waiting, and after a little he heard his mother's quick, light, uneven step tipping down the hall, and then she stood in the doorway and peered in uncertainly. Ralph rose and went to her. She looked at him, drawing back a little, and then a vague sweet smile broke over her empty face and she held out her little cool, limp hand. "That you, Ralph? How do, Ralph? Sit down."

He stayed only a short while. They did not have much to say to each other and he remembered that they had never had much to say. She did not question him about himself or about

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the things he had done and seen, and he remembered that to her the people and events outside her own life and the village life had no real existence. When he spoke of leaving she made no attempt to detain him, as though it were a natural thing for him to come home suddenly, for all she knew half across the world, and stay an hour. She said: "The girls will be sorry they missed you, Ralph. You might stop by on your way back to town and see your sister Laura at Gays Park. You know she married Edward Gay. She lost her little baby a while back and she's been mighty sick." She held up her cheek and his lips touched briefly her cool frighteningly soft flesh. "Goodby, my boy," she said and did not speak of seeing him again.

Ralph went out to his carriage disappointed and yet curiously relieved. He had expected to stay several days, and he had thought that he would get to know the girls again and perhaps do something for them. He had felt sorry for them, remembering that they were pretty girls and that they must have a damn dull time. But, he thought, this way might be best. His mother took it for granted that he had gone out of their lives and it might well be futile to attempt to come into them again. After all, he did not see just what he could do for them. In the little time he had been at home the dust and silence of the village street, the shabby old houses, the atmosphere of inertia and decay, were already too much for him.

He turned in the gateway at Gays Park and saw the house at the end of the drive, gaunt and square, open to the sun and wind, the blinds broken and the yellow paint peeling off its bricks. It was the fine house of the village, one of the show places of the whole county, and often when he had heard talk of fine houses, Ralph had spoken of this one, of Gays Park at home. He remembered how pleased he had been to think of Laura as mistress of it. Now he said to himself: "It may be a fine old place and maybe an architect or

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somebody of the sort would get all steamed up over it, but I'm frank to say I wouldn't want to tell a stranger that that was my sister's house."

There was nobody downstairs and he went up, stopping at the top of the steps to call Laura's name.

She was in bed. Her room was very hot. The shades were down and it was littered with her clothes and it had an odor to it, very faint but perceptible. Every woman's room he had ever been in had had that same smell about it. A man's room would smell of tobacco or shoe leather or sweat, never simply of himself. At the thought of such a room in his small neat apartment, darkened and littered and faintly odorous, he said to himself: "Oh no! I'm well out of the whole business." He took out a clean handkerchief and wiped his hands and face.

He thought Laura looked old and ill. Her face was lined and discolored and her coarse, thick black hair was matted on the pillow. She was a little repulsive, as women seen in intimacy always were to him. "They're unhealthy creatures, all of them," he thought. He thought that their lives were like stagnant water. Everything really important was kept closed and secret.

Now if he had had four brothers, he knew just what he would say to them: "Get out. Get away like I did. What do you like? What sort of thing do you want? If I can, I'll help you to it. Anyway, come and stay with me and look about you. Get out into a big place and something will turn up." It would have given him pleasure to be able to say this. He would help these brothers gladly, having the comfortable assurance that their lives would be made apart from his. Their ordinary life would be outside the house; they would never become an integral part of his existence, depending upon it for their living; he would not come home and find them waiting for him. He felt that he could have undertaken all four brothers, could have made some place for

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them in his immaculate apartment before he could make room for a single woman. He could not say to his sisters, "Tell me what you want and I'll help you to it." All they wanted was men; marriage was all they were fit for. They would want to come and stay with him one by one until he found a man to take them off his hands. He thought, "I might as well start a bawdy house and be done with it."

He saw that Laura wore a long-sleeved, high-necked nightgown of some thick stuff. There were fine embroidery and little ribbons at the throat and wrists, but he did not notice that; it seemed to him sad and shameful that a young woman with Laura's eyes and her fine heavy hair should know nothing better than such a garment. He thought suddenly that perhaps if one of the girls was still very young, slight and fresh and pretty, with something of the sexlessness of childhood still about her, he might do something for her, after all. He might manage a short visit. He said, recollecting that she was the youngest, "How old is Matty now?"

Laura ceased her nervous picking at the counterpane and said, with the first touch of animation in her voice: "She's twenty. I'm nearly twenty-two. There's just a year's difference between all the girls, but there was three years between Robert and Bess, and four between Robert and you. Mamma says it's always like that with boys and girls. The boys are strong and hungry and a drain on your strength, so that you don't get that way again so soon. She says every woman wants boys for that reason. But, Ralph, I think this time I'd like a little girl. I'm more used to girls and it seems like they'd be more company later on."

Ralph was silent. Even with his slight experience of women he was not surprised, only profoundly embarrassed and discomforted. Even he knew that motherhood robbed a woman of all decent reticence. Let any woman, no matter how modest and reserved, have a baby, and while it was young at least all modesty and reservation was lost to her. Just as

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she bared her breast to nurse it without shame, so she could open her mind shamelessly and show her secret female thoughts, all preoccupied with the getting of children and their birth and death.

Laura had no more to say to him than his mother, and made him far more uncomfortable. She was not yet twenty-two and all the freshness was drawn out of her. There was a button missing on her coarse high-necked nightdress, and as she lay on her side toward him Ralph could see her heavy breasts pressed together between her arms. He thought of her as he had last seen her—or was it Matty or Callie or Bess?—slight and active, with fine long, blowing hair. He realized how long it had been since he had seen them. Seven years had not seemed so long until he saw the haggard woman they had made of a slim leggy child. He knew now that it had been folly for him to think of coming back.

He got up to leave, and she put his hand to her cheek and smiled and said: "Goodby, dear Ralph. Come back again soon." And even before he was gone she turned her head away as though she were tired of everything, of him as well, and could no longer make the effort to conceal it.

Ralph drove back to Melford in the bright stillness of the late summer afternoon. The sun was low and its level rays shone into his eyes; it seemed to him that it was long past time for its setting. There was no one on the road and he found it difficult to realize that life went on at all in this suspended silence. The whole day was empty, breathless, endless, like Sunday in a strange place. He had had no luncheon; he did not know now whether he had got home too early for it or too late. There had seemed to be no one with Laura at Gays Park; it was not hard to believe that here all activity was suspended and people did not eat at all. He hoped, a little childish and pathetic, unused to concerning himself about such things, that he would not have to go without his

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dinner. He felt tired and hungry and a little sick with dullness.

At the hotel in Melford he decided that he would not spend the night. He could just catch the evening train North which would put him in New York in the morning.

Over his late meal in the diner he grew more cheerful. It was not a good dinner, but Ralph liked to travel; he liked boats and trains and all means of conveyance from one place to another. Traveling, he could put up with discomfort and inconvenience that would make him ill at any other time.

He went into the smoker and had a cigar, savoring appreciatively the full flavor of his surroundings, and picked out here and there a man with whom he might talk later on. It was pleasant to think that here he could begin a conversation and end it when he chose; he might talk all night and get off without a good-by in the morning. That could not happen with a woman. Women were never casual, and a man could not even talk to one without somehow incurring a responsibility. And if one might not dismiss in the morning a woman he had talked with the night before, how much less could a man rid himself of women relatives he once admitted to his life?

Ralph thought suddenly of his father and how he would have relished the opportunity to appoint himself the guardian of a family of women. "I honestly believe that sort of authority was all that made his life worth living. Even politics would have been flavorless without women to be mystified and admiring before his part in them. Poor old cuss, the only real importance he ever had was the importance of a cock in a chicken-yard, and I guess he liked as many hens as he could get clucking round him."

Ralph thought dimly that it would be a hard day for women, if it ever came, when most men ceased to find it worth while to keep a whole troupe of them to bolster up their self-importance. Mothers-in-law, old-maid aunts, sis-

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ters, and unmarried daughters, whose only trade was the flattery of small services—darning socks and turning cuffs and counting out sugar lumps for coffee. What in God's name would become of them if the expense of setting up as Providence ever outweighed its satisfactions? For the first time he consciously wondered how his father and so many others like him, with not a penny in the world, managed to afford their raft of women. Of course, the town had really kept *them*, Ralph thought, grimly. "The whole damn lot of us were on the town until he finally got me off on the government." He thought of his father's magnificent talent for collecting tokens of esteem—medals, fresh eggs, political office, newspaper mention, hard cash—all these his due for living virtuously and breeding children and voting the Democratic ticket. There was no gift, no favor, no charity he could not accept with dignity unimpaired. Ralph remembered a conversation he had had with him the last time he was at home. The old man refused to tell him the amount of the mortgage on the house or even if he were able to meet the payments on it. "But we ought to try to get it paid off," Ralph said. "Do you ever think how mother and the girls will make out later on?" The old gentleman leaned forward in his chair and spit accurately between the porch railings. "Son," he said, "I know the man well that holds that paper and I know he's not the sort to foreclose on women. Don't you worry, son. I can manage. And whatever happens to me, the house is safe enough for the girls' lifetime. You might of known I'd see to that."

Ralph debated again whether his father actually was a scoundrel. He had always managed, but somebody else, or nobody at all, had stood the bill. He had palmed off one daughter and would have asked nothing better than to do the same with the others. Nevertheless, he had carried them all, somehow, without worry or complaint, and take it as you would that was a notable achievement. Ralph shud-

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dered at the thought that he might ever be called upon to do a tenth of what his father had done. He knew of nothing Mamma and the four girls had to live on except the little he sent them and Bess's three hundred a year from the school. He would send his check home regularly every month, he would even try to increase the sum he sent them, but surely it would be as well to keep away himself. "The Lord knows," he thought, "what bills would have come pouring in if word had got round that there was a man about the house!"

He was pleased to have gotten off so lightly from his rash visit home, but at the same time he had an uneasy conscience. This uneasiness manifested itself, as it always did, in a disturbance of his sense of taste and his digestion: his cigar was suddenly no comfort to him and he wondered what had been wrong with his dinner. He was falling back upon the thought of all he would have done for them if his sisters had been brothers, when in the nick of time he thought of Agnes. He had not seen her for years. He recalled that she was a pretty little thing and that she had written him a proper note, asking him to her wedding. She had married into the Navy, too; it was odd that he had not run across her, and odder still that he had not inquired about her. It was too bad the way they had lost touch with Agnes. As soon as he got to New York he would look her up; it was quite possible that she was not only in this country, but stationed somewhere in the East. It would be no trouble to find her; and, he thought, what if it was? She was quite as much his sister as the others. He would certainly get in touch with Agnes. After all, he thought, recovering from the curious malaise that threatened him, he was not the sort of man who could be comfortable cut off from his family.

Chapter Five

THE girls were bewildered by the suddenness with which an old, half-hopeless dream had come true and had come to nothing. They felt now that they had never really believed in Ralph's homecoming, but all the time it was his return they had doubted secretly; it never occurred to them that he could come back and still escape them. After all the years that he had been coming home to change everything for them, he had come and gone and nothing was different. Their life would go on just as it had before.

Matty was like a wild thing when she realized what had happened. She raged and wept, flinging herself on the floor in the pretty strawberry-pink cotton dress she had pressed so carefully that morning to wear in to Melford. In spite of their own feeling, her sisters felt bound to comfort her. They said that Ralph was in America now, that New York was only one night away, that he would be coming soon again. But they could not keep her or themselves from knowing that if he had been coming back he would have stayed.

Matty rushed to Laura to find out what he had said. "Tell me what he *said*!" she cried, over and over. When she heard that he had actually asked about her, how old she was, mentioning her by name and picking her out from them all, she was in a frenzy of disappointment. Laura said, contritely: "I know I should have kept him until he saw you. Maybe I could have made him stay. But I never thought, honey. I was so sick." Matty put her hands over her ears and rocked back and forth: "Oh, keep quiet! You're married

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to Edward. What do you care about the rest of us? Just keep quiet, can't you?"

She shut herself up in her room and refused to eat, and Callie, coming to her door many times each day, calling her softly, could get no answer. The third day Nona Gay came to see her and she let her in. Nona stopped on the threshold and cried out with admiring horror: "Why, you're simply ghastly! The whole family will have fits when they see you! I bet your mother will write to her brother to ask you down to Norfolk!"

Matty said: "It wouldn't do any good if she did. He's had one of us put off on him and he'll take care he never has another." She put her hands over her face and began to cry, sitting hunched on her bed in her thick, unbleached cotton nightgown. "Oh, Nona, nothing ever comes out right for me! First Edward, and then Len, and now Ralph. Ralph's the worst of all. I've always counted so on him. I've always thought, well, anyway, there's Ralph. Oh, I know if I'd got to see him he would have taken me back with him. I could have made him. But now he's gone for good."

"Foot!" Nona cried. "He wouldn't have taken you, not if I know Ralph Flood! What he might have done is to make a lot of halfway promises. I think it's a good thing he has gone and you didn't get your hopes all up. Now that's over with. Now, Matty, for goodness' sake buck up and do something for yourself. You set to work and do something."

"What?"

"Well, for one thing, Bess promised you the school."

"You know as well as I do when it comes right down to it Bess will never in the world give it up. Nobody would make her, either; they'd all say to let her have it a little longer, I'm so young."

"And what of it?" Nona cried. "I never could see why all of you took so much stock in what that old school would do for you. All it does is let you sit up high in Peach's buggy

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so people notice you, and you don't need that. All you have to do is to put your head out the door to have people take notice; everyone says you're the prettiest girl in the county. I declare, Matty Flood, I'd never worry as long as I had your looks!"

"Nona, you tell me. What would you do if you were me?"

"O Lord! Well, I'd take myself up to Ralph in New York if I was so crazy to go—I'd know once I got there he'd have to let me stay. Or I'd go to Melford and work in Raphael's. Everybody in Melford knows you, and some would say that you were dreadful and others would stand up for you and that would make a lot of talk. Those on your side would be sure to fuss over you and ask you around, and the first thing you knew you'd be having a grand time. And if I didn't have the gumption to do something like that, I'd admit it and I'd say to myself, well, the best thing for you is to get married just as quickly as you can."

"Who to?" Matty asked, laughing. She thought, "What on earth would I do without Nona?" She said, looking up at Nona and laughing with the tears still streaking her face: "There's nobody besides Hugh Tidball and Mr. Tom Weems, and they haven't either of them asked me."

"You know you could have Hugh any time you wanted if you'd take Maude and the sick cows with him. And Mr. Tom Weems! But sho! I don't mean them! There're plenty of young men all around here who'd marry you in a minute just because you're Matty Flood and a lady, let alone pretty. But you can't be too choosy. Listen, Matty. I'm going to tell you something I haven't breathed to a living soul. I'm going to marry Ivy Lucas."

"Nona Gay!"

"Don't look so horrified, honey. You needn't expect to see me waiting on you in the store or sitting at the head of the hotel table. That's the good of marrying a man like Ivy Lucas, you can do pretty near what you please. I've made

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him buy some land out in the country, and, now he's got it, you can bet he's going to make it pay. He won't be one of these shiftless farmers. What do I care if he is common? He's smart and he'll be well off some day, you'll see. He's putting a lot of land into orchard. He says apples are the thing for this country and in five years he says we'll have a thousand acres of apple orchard."

They looked at each other, Nona scarcely believing in her own boast. Where they lived a hundred-acre farm was a large one, and it was cornfield and wheatfield, and garden and pasture besides.

Matty thought: a thousand acres of apple trees all like the three at Gays Park in the spring. And Nona would walk under them with a man who was common trash, but smart and young and strong.

Matty said, faintly: "Well. But there isn't anyone like Ivy Lucas. All the rest are common, and no 'count too."

Nona laughed. "You'll find somebody if you want to. But I told you you ought to pair off with Ivy. Every time we saw 'em, though, you couldn't look at anything but Willy Peach. Willy may be mighty good-looking, but what good is that when he's already married?"

When Nona left, Matty clung to her. "What am I going to do without you! How can you marry Ivy Lucas and leave me all alone?"

Nona looked down at the head pressed into her side and thought: "Poor darling Matty, she is such a fool!" She suddenly felt a sharp foreboding, and sitting down again on the bed, throwing her arms around Matty, she cried: "Oh, Matt, do be careful! Matty darling, please don't be a fool! If you'll just be patient I'll do something for you. I don't know what, exactly, but I'll find something to make you happy. Just give me time to get settled. You can come to visit me afterwards and stay as long as you want, and I'll have other people, too, and we'll have lots

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of fun. Oh, Matty, just give me a little time and I truly will find you some one nice to marry!"

Matty sat up at once, smoothing her hair and smiling, as radiant as a child. She said, clasping her hands: "Do you promise? Oh, we will have a good time! You'll have lots of grand clothes, Nona. Will you let me wear them when I come? Will you take me to the dances at the Springs?"

When Nona left she admonished her: "Not a word to anybody, Matt!" And at the door she turned and added, pertly: "When people talk, you can just tell them not to be too sorry for Nona Gay. You'll see, some day I'll be ahead of everybody around here. I'm not worrying about my bargain! And, anyhow, at the worst I'll have been to bed with something better than old Tom Weems or Hugh Tidball!"

Matty gave a little shriek of horror and delight, and Nona went out laughing.

Matty got back into bed and lay still. Now that Nona was not there her courage and confidence faded. She was alone, in spite of what Nona said to comfort her.

She and Nona had spent a feverish summer, running the roads, loitering along the village street, whispering together and looking after men like Ivy Lucas and Willy Peach. At the thought of Willy Peach her heart quickened. He was a handsome fellow, tall and lean, burned brick red by the sun, with smooth carrotty hair and small light eyes set close together. People said he was a good-looking devil and a mean one. How could she have helped preferring him to Ivy Lucas at their occasional, flurried, half-accidental meetings? There had been nothing between them; whatever there was between Nona and Ivy had come later, when she was not with them. One day the two young men had followed them along the road until they glanced around and laughed and waited for them to come up. Then the four of them walked on a little way before the men turned off. Two or three times after that they met and sat for a while in the woods or on

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the roadside, plucking grass, throwing stones into the creek, talking little and laughing a great deal. There was nothing more than that, but there was always the shadow of something more, of something the girls sought out and then defied. Now, Matty thought, she would be left alone to face that shadow. She felt confused and fearful. What would she do if Willy Peach tried to overtake her when she walked alone? Nona had a true boldness that she lacked. Nona would do things, but something would happen to her. Something would surely happen, without Nona to follow and without Ralph's coming to hold to.

Matty realized for the first time that her life had already begun. Until now, everything was just a preparation that did not count. But she knew now that this was her real life, here with Mamma and Grandmamma and Callie and Bess, the only life she would ever have. Soon she would be old, an old maid like Callie and Bess, and even the little she now had would be lost to her. She jumped out of bed and began to dress. She must get out of the house, away to the street and stores and to people! As long as she got out she did not care what she did or what happened to her!

She heard Callie coming up the stairs and she slipped across the room to lock the door, and stood against it. Callie called to her to come to supper, but she would not answer. After Callie went down she knew that she could not leave the house, for they would see her and run out into the hall, hiding their relief, pretending that nothing was wrong, putting their arms into hers and drawing her with them into the dining-room.

Matty sat on the edge of the bed, half dressed, and listened to their voices at supper and later on outside on the porch. She was hungry and tired and she felt ill; she put up her hands, feeling her hot cheeks, dimly pleased to know she had a fever and to feel the warm thick tears between her fingers. She thought of screaming; she would like to frighten them

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with a tantrum, but she was too tired. Then she remembered something. She went softly out of her room and down the hall to Mamma's room and opened the little cupboard where the medicines were kept. She found the peach brandy and uncorked it and drank from the bottle, holding her hand over her mouth and choking after every swallow. The strong liquor burned her throat and hurt her nose, but she managed to drink a good deal of it, and then went back to bed.

For a while she lay deliciously relaxed and happy in the warm darkness. She let herself think of Len Wilson and remember the evenings they had sat together on the little bench against the house wall. Soon she was sure he would come back to her. They were bound by that chain of soft, silent summer evenings; she knew he could not have forgotten that full contentment. Mingled with her certainty that he would return was a delightful new indifference. After all, it was pleasant just to lie in the dark, in her soft bed, and dream of him. She made pictures, so close and vivid they were almost better than reality. Len came for her and took her to Louisville which she saw as a city like Melford but far bigger and finer. There were parties and dances and love-making, and during the day she had girls to talk to, pretty girls who had come laughing and confident from their sweet-hearts' lips and arms. She walked with them on wide paved streets, looking in at bright store windows. Their arms were around her waist, there was one on each side, and the three of them laughed and whispered. Just as the dreams she was making for herself were as real as reality, so these whispered confidences, the shadow of a dream, were as thrilling as the imagined gaieties they told of. Until she fell asleep she wove with absorbing detail the talk between herself and the two girls. Leonard was forgotten as she wandered with them along the broad smooth pavement, looking in at dresses and jewels and glittering crowded soda fountains, and was absolutely happy.

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When Callie came up to bed she stopped by Matty's room and called to her softly. There was no answer and as she listened she heard Matty's breathing, very loud and hoarse. She tried the door, but it was locked. Several times she got out of bed and went to her room and listened, and next day Matty was ill, as she had feared. But Hugh Tidball told them it was only what might be expected after the way she had carried on and when she had gone so long without food.

Now and then after this Callie noticed the same hoarse breathing when she passed Matty's room at night, and she formed the habit of stopping by the door and listening before she went to bed. But Matty continued to sleep with her door locked, and in the daytime she could learn nothing from her. All of them were worried about Matty. She was pale and not like herself; she would not tell them how she felt, and when they begged her to see Hugh Tidball again she laughed and ran out of the room. She was never at home nowadays; none of them could think what she found to do with herself all day long. Even after Nona Gay ran off with Ivy Lucas—good riddance, the Flood women told each other grimly—Matty was out of the house as much as ever. Only Bess was not concerned about her. "I'd think you all would be glad she'd found something to do besides screaming and starving herself like a baby," she said. "I know I hope she's happy whatever it is she's up 'to." The summer waned and fall came on again, and Bess thought: "She's forgotten it. It's past time now and Matty hasn't once mentioned the school."

Chapter Six

ONE evening in October Bess Flood thought she saw something move in the darkness down by their gate. She went out to see, and Clyde Cover stepped out from the shadows and came and stood by the gate.

Bess said: "Oh, Clyde! How do you do!" They looked at each other a moment and then Clyde put on his hat. "Well—" he said, and nodded, and went on down the street.

As Bess walked back to the house she was trembling. She said: "It's funny that he should have been standing there." She spoke half aloud and laughed to herself.

Every winter Clyde left the village early and did not come back until the spring. Some people said he worked on the railroad and some that he bummed his way farther South, following on the heels of the hot weather. The last winter, when he had stayed on into November, he had caught a fever and lain sick all winter at the Floods' house, and the men in the village had laughed and said, "That boy sure can't do without the hot weather!" This year when October came and he had not gone yet, they said, "You fixing to get sick again and board free all winter?"

Each night Bess Flood remembered the clump of shadows at their gate and forced herself to remain indoors. It was two weeks since she had seen Clyde there, and every evening she thought of him and wondered if he were there again. At last she stole out, through the back door and around the side yard, keeping close to the fence. When she came to the gate Clyde was there. He said: "I began to be scared you'd

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never come. I been by here every evening and every time I'd stop and wait a little."

They walked on down the street together. Neither of them knew what to say and they were both afraid of meeting some one. Near Lucas's store they stopped and Clyde took off his hat. "Well," he said, "good-by." He held out his hand shyly. All evening Bess's hand remembered the touch of his; the skin of that hand felt different and she looked at it and touched it.

The next night she went out again and he was there. He said: "Listen. You know the place in the woods on the road to the cemetery, by the creek where the kids bathe summer-time? Nobody's ever there now. Can't you come afternoons, on your way back from school? Here somebody'll see us sure and get you into trouble."

When she drove home from school the next day Bess turned the horse into the little road that followed the creek. It twisted through a wood and she kept turning her head to look back until the first bend hid her from the main road. She saw Clyde walking along slowly, switching his leg. He led the horse off the road and looped the reins over a branch. "We won't go far off and nobody'll be coming along this way," he said, and started off through the trees.

Bess stopped. She called after him weakly, "Clyde—" She meant to tell him that she must go back and that they must not meet like this again. He turned round and came up close to her, smiling, and put his hand on her arm. "Yes'm, Miss Bessie?"

She began again uncertainly, "Clyde —"

He was listening, and then he stiffened and forgot her. Without a word to her he slipped away and disappeared into the wood.

Bess turned and saw Callie running toward her.

Callie did not seem to see her until she came close, and then she said: "Bess? Why, Bess!" She was panting as though

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she had run a long way, and her smooth coiled hair had fallen loose. She said, "Where is the buggy?" She was beside it, and Bess went back the few steps and got the horse and buggy and Callie climbed in. "Drive on a little way down this road," she said. Only after they started Callie asked, as though it had just come into her mind, "Bess, what on earth are you doing here?"

Bess said, glibly: "I often turn in here. It's pretty. And today I had a headache and I thought a little walk would do me good."

Callie said, dismissing her, "Well." Then she asked: "Have you seen Matty today, Bess? Have you ever seen her here?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's here somewhere now. We must keep on till we find her."

They drove slowly. Every now and then Callie leaned forward to peer into the wood on either side and called softly: "Matty! Matty!" Once they saw a man among the trees, and Callie cried out, sharply, "Who is that?" She wanted to get out and go after him, but Bess held her back. "Callie Flood! Have you lost your mind!"

Callie continued to talk about the man, while her eyes darted from side to side in search of Matty. "What do you suppose he was doing there, slinking round? Who did it look like to you, Bess? Do you think it was anyone we know? Do you think it might have been that Willy Peach?"

Bess thought it must have been Clyde and she said: "Oh, do shut up about him for a minute! How on earth do I know who it was? You come running along like a wild thing, hunting Matty, and then go off on some man you think you saw! For pity's sake, Callie, what is the matter?"

A little farther on they saw Matty, sitting on a fallen log and idly throwing stones into the creek.

When she saw them coming toward her she began to

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laugh. She pointed to them and laughed and her head rolled a little from side to side. Bess was frightened. The reins slipped out of her hands and the horse switched his tail over them and her hands trembled so that she could not get them free. Callie, who had jumped out of the buggy and was suddenly very calm, extricated them and gave them back. Callie led Matty to the buggy and helped her in and got in herself. "Drive home quick!" she said to Bess. Matty sat between them and laughed all the way home.

Callie sent Bess over to Gays Park for Edward. Edward came and brought Laura with him, thinking that whatever was wrong they would make less of a scene before Laura, haggard and ill, far gone with her second child.

Mamma was in her room upstairs, playing cards, and the girls and Edward sat in the parlor with the door shut, silent and far apart. Matty was on the sofa by herself. She had stopped laughing and sat quiet and sullen, fingering her dress.

Edward said, "What is all this, anyway?" He spoke to Matty gently: "Come on. Tell me what it's all about."

Callie cried: "Oh, take her side, of course! You've always brought out the worst in Matty, laughing at her and encouraging her and, the Lord knows, maybe even putting her up to this."

He looked at her coldly. "What do you think I have to do with Matty?"

Callie did not know what she meant. It seemed to her that he was at the bottom of all their trouble. Teasing Matty and flirting with her and leading her on when all the time it was Laura he wanted; and now, when he had married Laura, still hanging around her, calling out to her from the doorway of his office, driving with her into Melford, making a show of her and turning her head. Callie could not put it into words; she could only say, angry and helpless: "I don't know. I don't know." Suddenly she could no longer control her dislike and her distrust of him, and she cried: "Things

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have come to a pretty pass when you are the only man we have to call on, Edward Gay! I'd give anything in the world if Papa was alive!"

In this crisis the girls all longed for the Captain, missing him consciously for the first time since his death. If he were here he would tell them what to do. They would not have to decide what was right. Whatever he told them, right or wrong, they would have to do. They longed to have him back in one of his imperious moods, when he would give Matty a slap and perhaps Callie another, for stirring up all this bother, and then send them all about their business. "Not a word out of any of you! Don't come to me with your woman's squabbling!" That would have ended the whole sad affair conveniently and illogically, the only possible way for it to end. It would have left them nothing to do but forget, and that was what they all wanted. But there was no one now to make it possible.

Callie said, appealing to them: "I can't get a word out of Matty, so you all better see what you can do with her. Though goodness knows what she can have to say!" She took a letter out of the bosom of her dress, where she had thrust it, guiltily, secretly, to keep it safe, as one of the others might have hidden a love letter. "Just look at that. It opened my eyes, I can tell you! But all Matty has to say about it is that it was wicked of me to open it when it was addressed to her."

Edward said, "You were a great fool, Callie."

"But my Heavens, Edward! Mrs. Peach brought it here herself and put it in my hand, 'So there'd be no mistake.' She wanted me to read it; you could see that right in her face. Anybody would have opened it."

Bess and Laura cried out together: "Well, what does it say? What on earth is in it?"

Callie kept it folded in her hand and said, harshly: "It seems that Matty's been meeting her husband places, out

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there in the woods and all around. Lord knows who hasn't seen them; everyone has but us, I reckon! Well, she said she knew Matty was going to meet him today, and she wrote her to keep away. She said she was sick and tired of it, and Willy was, too."

Matty cried, "That's a lie!"

Bess said, "I always knew something like this was bound to happen."

Callie looked down. "And the other thing. The condition she was in when we found her. I've suspected, but . . . Oh I can't even talk about that!"

No one spoke.

Suddenly Matty covered her face with her hands and began to cry. Callie softened immediately and went over and sat beside her, patting her and soothing her. "Come upstairs with me, Matty. You're all tired out. Come on up to your room and lie down."

Matty went with her docilely, and after a few minutes Callie came back downstairs. She stood in the door and looked at them. Her face was still sad and anxious, but her cheeks were bright and her eyes had a triumphant flash. "One thing," she said, "poor Mamma must never know about this."

Edward laughed out loud and the girls all looked away from one another. How could Callie pretend that anything mattered to Mamma?

Callie went on speaking in her controlled, feverish voice: "Matty's ill; we've got to remember that. She's not really responsible for anything she's done. She's always been excitable and strange, and I believe that Ralph, and then Nona running off with Ivy Lucas, and all that, has made her really ill." She paused, and then said, in a soft, colorless tone: "I think she should stay in her room until she is well again. I'll take care of her. You all needn't bother. I'll do everything for her myself."

She stopped speaking and now they heard a faint sound

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upstairs. Matty was trying the door to her room softly. For a moment she fumbled with it as though she did not know what had happened, and then she began to shake it, and then to beat on it. There was a sound overhead of her feet running, and then she pounded on the door again. At last she screamed, hideously, endlessly.

Callie ran for Hugh Tidball, and the others looked away from one another, and Laura whimpered, covering her face.

Mamma pattered down the stairs. "What on earth!" she cried. "I never heard such goings-on in my life!" Bess said, "Matty's in one of her fits."

Mamma sat down with them and twisted her hands, looking at Edward and Laura and Bess in turn. Her face broke up into pitiful unaccustomed lines of worry and perplexity and fright.

Callie came back with Hugh Tidball and they went upstairs together. Edward said: "We must go. This afternoon has just about done for Laura."

Mamma and Bess followed them out on the porch, holding as long as they could to the comfort of their company. When they came back in they realized that the screaming had stopped and now there was only a faint, exhausted sobbing. Mamma said: "Well! Thank goodness that didn't last long!"

They sat in the parlor. Mrs. Flood reached automatically for the cards on the little table, and then looked at Bess and drew back her hand like a child. Bess said: "You know how Matty is, Mamma. She's got in a temper and a fever again and Callie locked her door so she wouldn't be running out."

Mamma did not answer. She seemed to be thinking, trying to fit the pieces of a puzzle. Bess saw her struggle to keep her mind on the problem and saw her give it up. "Matty was always a difficult child," she said. "You were all hard to do with except Ralph, and Robert when he was alive. Don't

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talk to me about girls! I'd rather raise a regiment of boys than my four over again! The first thing you know Matty will be sick, tearing around in a temper, half the time with a high fever. Though I must say Callie was a goose to lock her in; she might have known it would bring on a tantrum." She reached again for her cards, and this time she took them up and shuffled them and laid out a game of solitaire.

Bess said, cruelly: "Mamma, don't you sometimes worry about Matty?"

Mrs. Flood glanced up. She had already forgotten Matty. Her dazzled short-sighted eyes swept Bess impersonally, like a dim searchlight, and went back to her cards. "Young folks are always queer until they marry and settle down. And even if they go on being queer, well, worry won't help that."

Callie went down the hall and looked in at Bess meaningly. Then her voice came, bright and casual: "Bess! Come here a minute, will you?"

It was Dell's evening out. Callie sat in the kitchen in one of the broken padded chairs, leaning forward, her hands tightly clasped. Her eyes looking at Bess were fixed and very bright. "Bess, we're going to face it together, aren't we? For poor little Matty's sake we must."

Bess said: "Are you planning to keep her locked up in her room?"

Callie's manner changed and her triumphant eyes were veiled. "Do you want her out running the roads with Willy Peach?"

Bess shrugged. "You think you can get Hugh Tidball to dope her every day for you?"

"Bess!" Callie was outraged. Then she capitulated and asked, bitterly: "Well, wouldn't even that be better than what's been going on?" She glanced at Bess and said, softly: "Bess, she's had something to drink before this afternoon. I've suspected it—I couldn't help noticing. But I wouldn't

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let myself believe it before. Where do you guess she gets hold of it?"

"Lord knows. Willy Peach or some man, I reckon. She's a slut."

"Bess! A name like that about your own sister! Oh, you mustn't even think such things! We must all try to help her. I'll do anything. I'll give my whole life gladly!" She was filled with the terrible ecstasy of martyrdom.

Bess said, "Callie, for Heaven's sake don't keep after her until you run her crazy!"

"Somebody's got to look out for her."

"Well, mark my words, you'll run her crazy!" Bess's voice rose shrilly. "What's the matter with you, Callie! I think you must be touched! Matty, too, she's not right. Nobody is in this house. If I can't get away from here I declare I'll go crazy, too!"

The sisters stared at each other, silenced by the dreadful things Bess had cried out openly. In the stillness the cockroaches rustled in the basket of dirty clothes under the stove, and one of them, over an inch long, scuttled across the floor. Callie put out her foot and crushed it. "Ugh!" she said. "Dirty creatures!"

She took up a ham Dell had left out on the kitchen table and brushed off the ants and carried it into the storeroom. High on the walls, above the shelves of cold food, hung three or four huge somnolent spiders, the protectors of the place, who came out at night to eat the bugs. Bess gathered up the dirty supper dishes and piled them in the sink and flung a dishcloth over them, sending a cloud of little light-brown roaches, not much bigger than ants, and two fat black waterbugs scurrying down the drain. Callie took up the lamp and they went upstairs, leaving the rich, warm, dirty kitchen to breed and rustle and creep in the darkness.

• Upstairs in her room Bess did not undress at once. She stood for a while before her mirror with the little flame of

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the candle blowing up between her and her reflection in the glass, with her arms raised as if to take down her hair. Then she began to walk wildly back and forth, as Matty had walked earlier in the evening. Several times she went toward her door and turned back as though it were fastened against her.

She thought: So everything was settled; the future lay ahead, a plain path that had only to be followed. Laura had escaped, but Callie and Matty and she herself were to go on living in the old house together, the innocent strait life of their childhood and young girlhood. She would continue to teach school, for Matty would never be allowed that independence now, and Callie would be housekeeper and martyr and poor Matty her martyrdom. Mamma would play her card games, and Grandmamma lie in bed in the foul room upstairs, which was kept sealed from the sun and air even in the summer now, as though Grandmamma were already a corpse to fall into decay the moment her coffin was opened.

Grandmamma could not possibly last another winter. Then the cold creeping out from the walls toward the heart of the room that was the oil-stove and the quilt-piled bed, and the cold wind blowing in under the door and windows, in spite of all their effort, would lower the temperature, would charge the air with dangerous oxygen, and upset the feeble equilibrium that was Grandmamma's life. Then there would be four women left, and later when Mamma died there would be three. Then two, and one. Grandmamma motionless in her bed showed what each of them must come to in her turn. Some day, intolerable years ahead, everything would end and there would not be a young living thing to come after any of them.

Bess pressed her hands to her eyes with her familiar gesture of despair. Then she began to walk up and down, mov-

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ing fiercely and stealthily, like a prisoner who has found the door unlocked and plots his escape.

Clyde Cover slept in the livery stable at the end of the village street. One corner of it that had a small entrance of its own he used for his shop, and when he was through his work and through loitering in the village, he lay down there among his tools and slept. Tonight he lay in the open doorway rolled in a blanket, the moon shining on his face. When Bess's shadow fell across him he started up. In the daytime he was slow and indolent, sitting on a box in front of Lucas's, half asleep like a dog in the sun; but at night he was alert and vigilant. He sat up and made a place for Bess without a word, and she sat down beside him on the doorstep.

"Clyde, are you going away pretty soon, like you do every winter?"

"I was figuring I might go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!"

"Yes'm."

Bess was bewildered and dismayed by the knowledge that he would have left her without another word. He did not want her, after all, and now she did not know where to turn. Life was suddenly too confused and difficult. She gave it up and put her head down on her knees and cried. She was wrapped in a shawl, and when she raised her head and looked at him the wind lifted her hair from her high round forehead. He thought of the nights she had slipped into his room, muffled in an old bathrobe, her hair in a tail, to turn his pillow for him and to give him a drink. He moved closer to her and put his arm around her and she cried with her head against his shoulder.

He heard the faint clear whistle of the eleven-o'clock train as it rounded the bend in the tracks, going north from Melford. In half an hour the fast southbound train would pass and slow down at the siding to throw off mail to the waiting

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freight. Clyde knew all the crew; many a night he met this train and rode with them as far as Melford. This time of year they would be looking for him; the engineer would give a quick glance around before he speeded up; they would let him on tonight without any trouble.

He stood up and threw inside the door the blanket in which he had been sleeping. "Come on," he said, holding out his hand. He and Bess went hand in hand down the backhill road, past the row of darkened Negro cabins, and out of the village.

PART THREE

BESS

Chapter One

Clyde and Bess lived in Detroit six years, longer than they had ever stayed in one place. Lilius was born there, and after that Clyde no longer came home and said, "I'm fed up with this town, with this whole part of the United States!" He stuck to his job and worked hard, and when the machine shop where he worked became an automobile plant he began to make money, and he could not do enough for Bess and Lilius. But Bess was never able to persuade him to buy a home.

They went from a boarding-house to furnished rooms, and then to a room and finally a suite in a good hotel. Clyde had done well. He had no education, but neither had most of the rising men. A man who knew the workings of machinery in those days could name his own price, and when Clyde put his hands on a machine it came alive under them, like a woman. He and Bess could have had a house in a nice part of town and kept a servant, but he would not hear of it. Even the boarding-house where they lived at first, where he had to pay a week in advance and eat all his meals at the same table, was too domestic for him. He liked their life at the hotel as well as he could ever like living year in and year out in the same place. There were always people coming and going, and that made a change, a little as though he had moved on himself. Only a few people lived permanently at the hotel, and he said to Bess: "Let's keep clear of them. It's bad enough to see their faces every day, much less having to talk to them." He cherished the secret comfortable knowledge that even though he stayed on there for years he could pick up and leave at a moment's notice. Whenever

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he opened his closet and saw his two suitcases side by side, he knew that any day he liked he could throw his clothes into them, pay his bill, and walk out. He could not have tolerated marriage without this conditional freedom.

Lilias sat on a little stool in a corner of the room and watched her father and mother dress for dinner. Whenever they dressed up to go out she came in to watch them. She looked at her father's broad back as he leaned forward to see his tie in the mirror. The gas-chandelier threw his reflected face into the shadow and glittered on the top of his sleek head. The gaslight paled his brown skin; he was all black and white like the beautiful men she cut out of fashion books. Her mother was never so beautiful as he, but tonight, Lilias thought, she was lovely, too. She wore a red dress out of which her shoulders rose thin and golden. Her eyes were dark and her teeth very white in her sallow face, and her great billowing pompadour was black and burnished. She stood directly under the light, drawing on her gloves, and her hair and eyes and teeth shone, and the ruffles of her skirt swirled round her in a crimson foam.

She smiled at Lilias, and looked at Clyde and smiled, and he turned away from the mirror and looked smiling at them both. Lilias knew: "I shall never forget this." All her life the memory of that evening stood out brilliantly black and white and red under the glare of the gaslights in the gilt-painted chandelier.

Clyde pulled out his watch. "We got plenty of time yet," he said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and grinned at Lilias and clapped his hands for her to come to him as though she were a little dog. She went over shyly and stood between his knees. He took hold of her shoulders and his hands held her skinny little back from shoulders to waist, and she was such a little thing, he thought, with a body like a bird's. He was moved by the miracle of her smallness and perfection; he felt for her the caressing, piti-

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ful tenderness he had for little new animals when he held them in his hands. He thought again, "This is the nearest I ever came to loving."

When she was a baby Clyde took care of her. He did almost everything for her then, for Bess was no good at that sort of thing. He had bathed her and dressed and fed her, and it had been fun. He had done none of these things for a long time, and he thought now that it was a pity. He shook her gently. "You ought to be in bed," he said. "How else are you going to get fat and strong like your pa?"

Bess laughed and put out her hand to him. "You never needed coaxing to make you sleep, I know!" Bess was happy. She lived in a city; she dressed to go out for dinner; she felt she had a place in the world. In this raw new country she need never be ashamed of Clyde and he would buy her everything she wanted except a home.

"Come on," Clyde said. "Let's us put her to bed. We got time and it's been a long time since I undressed her and put her into bed."

Bess said, "I've already told the chambermaid to come in."

"She can go out again. Come on, monkey, skin out of those ole clothes."

Lilias stood still, looking down at the floor.

Bess got her nightgown and whispered to her, and Lilias went into the bathroom and closed the door.

"What's all this?" Clyde said. "Ain't I going to bathe her and get her to bed?"

"Lilias is big enough to undress herself. She always does."

"But tonight I want to."

He started toward the bathroom and Bess stopped him. "No, Clyde. She's too big for that now. She's nearly six years old. She doesn't want you to, anyway. Didn't you see her face when you were talking?"

Clyde stared at her and turned dark red with anger. He

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did not think he had ever been so angry in his life. He threw off Bess's hand and opened the door. "Lilias! Come here to me."

She came, slowly and unwillingly, and stood before him. "Listen, honey. Daddy's going to put you to bed just like he used to do 'most every night when you were a real little girl. Don't you remember? He used to give you your bath and we had all kinds of fun splashing in that big old tub."

Lilias said, faintly, "I don't want to."

"Why not, baby?"

"I don't know."

Clyde said to Bess over her head: "I never heard such goddam foolishness in my life!"

"Clyde!"

He began to unbutton Lilias's dress as gently as he could. His fingers fumbled with the small buttons and it took him a long time. Lilias stood patiently, wincing a little. Now and then a tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it off silently on her nightgown. When she was naked he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her round to the mirror. "Look at that pretty little body, honey. What you got to be ashamed of there? Did you ever see anything any prettier?"

She would not look, and he took her chin and made her lift her head. Bess stood waiting, pale and silent, with averted eyes. He looked at her and at his baby's little cringing body and hanging head. Together they made him feel like a criminal. His hands dropped to his sides and he turned away. "Put on your nightgown and get into bed."

Lilias slipped her gown over her head and ran across the floor. She pulled the bedclothes up over her softly so they would not crackle, and lay still, hiding under her silence. Clyde kissed her goodnight. "Daddy's sorry," he whispered, shamefacedly. She kissed his cheek obediently and turned over to the wall. She was crying very quietly

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because she could no longer hold back her tears. Bess waved Clyde away and went to comfort her.

When she came into the other room Clyde said, savagely: "You fool! You crazy damn fool! To fill a baby with those notions, a little thing like her!"

Bess said, coldly: "Don't you want your child to have some notion of decency?"

"Women like you ought to be shut up!"

They went down the hall. Bess said, walking along, not looking at him, smiling: "If I'm a fool, what do you call yourself? You made things a hundred times worse. She'll never forget tonight."

"I know she won't," he said. "God damn you!"

"Clyde Cover!"

He did not answer. It was not worth the trouble, for he was through. There was nothing to hold him, now that she had taken Liliias away. As for Bess, he was used to her, that was all, and sometimes still pleased by her thin brown body and her precise lady ways. She had done this to Liliias, and he knew that it was what she had always wanted to do to him. Unless he was careful she would succeed. This was the same feeling he had had at home when the days grew shorter and the colder winds began to blow the earth's bones bare—that for him everything was over. He had made for the South in those days, and if he did not hurry now he would be caught forever in the chill sunless winter of respectability.

Clyde simply left them. The next day he came home and found Bess and Liliias out, and packed his two suitcases and carried them downstairs. He set the suitcases down in the hall and went into the hotel restaurant for lunch. He did not worry about Bess coming in. He had not even known surely that she would be out when he came home, but he was glad, because it made less fuss. He was through; his conscience accepted it and did not trouble him. When he paid

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the week's bill at the desk the clerk asked him in a friendly way if he were going to be away a few days, and he said yes he was, and waved away the bellboy and picked up his own bags and went out.

Bess did not know all day what had happened. When she had waited longer than usual for Clyde, she went down to have her dinner. The friendly desk clerk said to her, "So you're a widow for a few days, Mrs. Cover." She had gone as far as the dining-room door before she heard the import of his words, and then she turned and went back upstairs. She went straight to the closet; the suitcases were gone. She did not look to see what he had taken with him; she knew at once what had happened. It seemed to her now that she had never seen them side by side in the closet without knowing that some day it would be like this. She sat down heavily and stared at the empty space where the two suitcases had been.

For a day or two her life kept on of its own momentum. She did the small things she had planned and noted down precisely in the notebook in her bag. She had written: "Get spring hat and coat for Liliás; dress and hat for self; socks for Clyde." She bought the clothes for herself and Liliás, and it was only when she found herself looking at socks for Clyde that realization overwhelmed her. Who would pay the department store bill now? Clyde had left her. She had only a little money, and that she doubtless owed to the hotel. What had she and Liliás to do with new spring clothes? What was going to become of them? Where were they to eat and sleep? How were they to live?

She was filled with a sudden fierce activity. She called the plant, from a pay station, so that no one at the hotel would overhear, and told them that Clyde was ill. That would give her a little time. She went to the bank where she had a small account and drew out her money, to have it in her own hand and to keep a careful watch on it as it went. There

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was very little. Clyde never saved money. When he had any he spent it quickly. He had been generous to her, but he had made her spend, too. He wanted her to look well, to buy things for herself and Lillas, to go to movies and matinées. He could not bear to have her sit around, to see her settle to a routine that might end by binding him as well. Any suggestion she made of saving irritated him. "For God's sake spend it! It won't keep!"

"Money won't keep!"

"No. As long as we have any at all, there'll be more of it coming in. When we haven't any, you'll just have to spend all you've saved on rooms and food and things like that. What's the good of saving to do that? Those sort of things get paid for someways. Dog if we'll save money for things like that!"

So she had managed to put by very little. Frighteningly little. Now she sat at her desk, figuring desperately. She spent almost nothing, and at night when Lillas was in bed she added up what she had left, laying it out in piles of coins and notes, counting it over and over, balancing it feverishly against the scraps of paper on which she scribbled every cent she spent.

She read advertisements in the papers, and all day she called at offices, and in the evening wrote letters and slipped out to mail them secretly. But there was always some one before her, or if there was not, she was sent away because there was nothing she could do.

One day she had a brilliant thought. She would teach again, of course. Schools in Detroit were not like the country school she had taught at home, a cold, rank, dismal shed into which the children were herded like animals into a slaughter-pen. Here the schools were handsome solid edifices, full of air and light, full of people, other teachers, men and women, busy and well paid and secure. Bess longed to belong somewhere, to be settled in her own place in the world.

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Clyde had refused to give her a home, which even in this crisis would have been the center, with children, neighbors, social activities, of a web connecting her with life. When she had a place in one of those big schools she would come to know the other teachers, discover how they lived, and join her life to theirs and feel secure.

She felt as though everything were already settled, and she took Liliās out for the afternoon. She had neglected her for a long time, leaving her to sit alone in the hotel rooms, impatient when she had to think of the child at all. Now she wanted to give Liliās a treat. They spent the afternoon in the big stores, and Bess bought her a little gold chain, not even a dress which would at least be useful later on. They had supper in a restaurant, and that evening when Liliās was in bed Bess sat by her and told her the stories she liked best to hear, about when she was a little girl herself, and about Callie and Laura and Matty, and Mamma and the Captain, and all about the village.

Bess could not believe it when they told her she could not teach in Detroit, that she did not know enough to be a teacher. She was a lady, and every morning for years she had gone to Aunt Sophie's little class in the Office; at home that had been quite enough to ask of anyone who taught the children in the dirty crowded schools paid for by the state.

She made the rounds of the private schools, which were at once more critical, and more elastic in their demands. Being a lady would count with them. But they had more applicants than they could find places for, and by this time Bess was growing desperate and could not conceal something of her need. That decided them against her. It was not their policy to give positions to desperate women who must find work quickly in order not to starve.

Bess was not a practical woman. In all her life she had never given a thought as to how she would get her living. At home, no matter how little money there was, life itself

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was never deeply touched. There was, as a matter of course, food to eat and a colored woman in the kitchen to cook it. Even the first years, when she and Clyde were poor, Clyde was always there to be held responsible. Poverty did not frighten Bess; she was used to it as she would never be used to their recent easy existence. What frightened and dismayed her was the mysterious complicated business of keeping alive. She had always been fed, and now she was to feed herself, and Liliias too. It was impossible.

She wrote to John Hack in Norfolk, and no answer came from him. Now she was really terrified. All of them had thought of John Hack as the head of the family after Papa died; they could not feel that Ralph really counted when he was half the time all the way across the world. They turned naturally to John Hack when they needed money, and when Laura was married, and when poor Aunt Sophie had to be put away. Long before the Captain's death he had been there to help send Ralph to Annapolis and to take Agnes off their hands. Bess had never seen John Hack and had never written to him before, but she was entirely sure of his help. It did not occur to her that a near male relative could fail any woman. Ralph was not like Uncle John, settled and accountable, with a family of his own and so knowing what it was to be responsible for women; but if she had known where Ralph was or when a letter of hers would reach him, she would have written to him, too. When she did not hear from Uncle John she realized completely that she was alone in the world, that she actually had no one to look to but herself.

She thought of going to some of their acquaintances to ask them for help in finding the sort of vague unclassified work she might do. But she wanted more than anything else to hide from everyone what had happened. Her whole mind was set on the fact that the hotel people must not find out. As long as they did not know, she and Liliias had a place

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to live. Some day, of course, they would know, and she could not imagine what would happen to them then; but for a little time at least they were safe. Bess thought about the future as little as she could, and ended by almost forgetting it, except for waves of panic that left her trembling and her mouth dry and bitter.

The money she had left seemed worthless now. She took Liliás out and spent it in movies and restaurants with a silent stolid recklessness that frightened the child out of any pleasure. When it was gone, they spent the whole day in their rooms, not even going down stairs for their meals.

Clyde had been gone nearly a month and no one at the hotel had said anything to Bess. The Covers had lived there two years, and it was always Clyde who paid the bills. It was natural for them not to trouble Bess; and yet, she thought, a month was a long time. She wondered wildly if he had paid for them in advance when he left, or if perhaps he still sent money for them. Twice the plant had telephoned to ask about Clyde, and once she told them that he had been called home unexpectedly, and the second time that she expected him back very soon. She lied glibly, hoping that what she said was credible, that she herself sounded easy and unconcerned. Afterwards she flung herself on her bed and lay there weeping and trembling.

Soon after Clyde left her she had a letter from Callie, whom she occasionally wrote to and who made a point of keeping in touch. When the clerk gave it to her she had the presence of mind to say: "Mr. Cover is with his family in the South. I'm afraid he may be away a long time."

After that she had written to Callie, to Laura, even to Matty and Mamma. She begged them to write to her. She must get letters often, so that at the hotel they would not say: "Mrs. Cover never seems to get any mail. It's kind of funny she doesn't hear from him."

When Clyde had been gone six weeks she stopped writ-

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ing home. Nothing she did mattered now; it could be only a little while before everything would end. She no longer went down to the dining-room and had their meals sent up to them only when Liliás was so hungry she cried. She no longer worried about what the hotel people might think; she let herself sink into a torpor in which she felt scarcely anything and did not think at all.

It was early spring and there was rain every day. Bess sat by the gray stippled window in front of a little table and played cards. She happened to pick up a pack one day, and she found that the rhythmic slap of the cards on the table and the weaving spots of color did something to her mind so that she thought and felt less than before. Beyond the little world of sound and color made by her cards she was dimly conscious of Liliás kneeling at the other window, crouched on her little stool in the corner, in the next room curled up whimpering on the bed. From time to time Bess got up and moved around the room, dressed and undressed, roused herself to order a meal. Every movement she made seemed slow and heavy and yet easy, and very silent, as though she were living underwater.

Sometimes at night she woke up with her mind clear and lucid, so that all the terror and uncertainty of their existence was plain to her. She must do something, quickly, quickly! They could not drift like this! She must do something before it was too late! At these times she got out of bed hastily and lit the candle she and Clyde had kept to undress by, so that when they came in late they need not wake Liliás with the glaring overhead light. She took the candle and went over to Liliás's bed, to look at her, to be close to her, to try to think things out.

Liliás waked up the moment her mother got out of bed. Once she had found Bess sitting beside her in the middle of the night, looking down at her with a white face and staring eyes. Afterwards she went to sleep each night fearing that

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she would wake and find her mother there again, staring down at her with her dark, terrified eyes, holding the light away from her and shielding her face from it with a trembling hand. So Liliás slept lightly, and woke over and over again during the night, quivering with fear. Whenever she found Bess sitting beside her on the bed she did not dare to move or speak, and lay there stiff and motionless, looking up at her without a sound.

And Bess looked down at her, shielding her eyes from the candle flame. Now all her frozen indifference fell away and she loved Liliás passionately, defensively; somehow she would be strong and manage to save them both from the terrors that threatened them. She would lean over and press her cheek to her child's face, laughing and kissing her. Suddenly she was buoyed up by the very extremity of their necessity. She would do something because she must. Tomorrow, surely, she would find some way out. But, after all, what could she do more than she had done already? It seemed to her that she had tried everything. No one at home had answered her frantic letters except Callie, calm, unsuspecting, impervious, writing her wordily of all their small affairs. Even if she told Callie what had happened, could she realize their plight? It seemed to Bess that nobody at home could ever realize it. How could Callie, even if she understood their necessity, lay her hand upon the money to pay their bills and to bring them home? At home there was scarcely ever any actual money, and there must be less than ever now that they did not have Bess's three hundred a year from the school. All Callie could do was to write to John Hack, and Bess had done that already. There was Ralph, but no one knew where to find him. The only address they had ever had was that of his bank, which sent his monthly check and forwarded their letters to him. Who knew when a letter sent there would reach him? Bess had gone over all this in her mind hundreds of times before.

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There was nothing left to try. And again she knew herself helpless and knew that she must go on blindly and helplessly to the end. At this point she always began to cry. Her weeping distorted her white face and the tears streamed down her cheeks. She held her free hand between Liliás's eyes and the candlelight and she could not wipe them away.

Liliás was terrified. Like every child, she felt that a grown person's tears were mysterious and dreadful and not to be endured. They could not spring from the same simple causes as her own—from hunger or loneliness or fright. She moved as far as she could from her mother, over to the farthest edge of the bed, and lay squeezed tightly against the wall, covering her face. They huddled on the bed, on opposite sides, their backs to each other, weeping. At last Bess stumbled over to her own bed and Liliás sobbed herself to sleep.

This scene was repeated over and over, until even in the daytime Liliás was afraid of her mother, and stayed quiet and motionless in her corner, and finally ceased even to cry for food.

One afternoon Bess sat by the window, playing cards. The heat was turned off in the hotel and the steady rain outside made the room dark and cold. She sat with an old coat of Clyde's around her shoulders, and the window shade was rolled up to the top to let in every ray of light. For months of every year Bess and Callie and Laura and Matty had sat like this with their sewing, close to a window with the curtains pinned back, and thrown around them old coats of Ralph's and the Captain's, the only really warm clothes in the house. This chilly room, in the dark of a late rainy afternoon, might have been a room in their damp old house at home. Bess thought of this, and she looked down at herself and began to laugh. She said aloud: "This is funny. This really is a good joke. Here I am in the dark and cold, alone with a pack of cards. I might never have left home at all!" She kept on laughing. She had had no food that

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day, and long after she forgot what she found so funny in her plight she went on laughing because she could not stop.

Lilias, who had sat quietly through so many puzzling, gloomy, hungry days, could not endure this laughter. She began to cry, the wild pitiful wailing of a child who is terribly afraid.

Some one knocked at the door. Bess and Lilias stopped at once and sat perfectly silent. The knock sounded again, and Bess said, "Come in."

Mr. Carroll came in. He was the manager of the hotel, a large man in a very light gray suit with a ruddy, impassive face. He looked around the room. He saw the woman by the window, with the cards scattered on the table before her and upon the floor, and he saw the child crouching in the corner of the littered, untidy room. The chambermaid had been talking and it had come to him. She said she couldn't do her work with the two of them always in there, acting so queer and sometimes not even letting her get in. The desk clerk said that for some time all their meals at the hotel had been served in their rooms; for several days they had ordered scarcely anything and he had not seen them go out. Mr. Carroll was anxious. He knew that Mr. Cover was away and he wondered if Mrs. Cover were ill; she had impressed him as a queer, flighty woman, not to be relied on to act like an ordinary person. The Covers had lived at the hotel two years; they paid their bills regularly and seemed like nice, quiet people. Mr. Cover had a good job with a good company. Even after he talked with the clerk and chambermaid, Mr. Carroll was not sure anything was wrong. But now he saw in a moment, without seeming to notice anything, that everything was wrong. He looked anxious when he came in, but now he said, cheerfully: "Well, Mrs. Cover, I just looked in on you to see how you are getting on. I feel responsible to your husband for you and the little girl, you being left as you might say in my charge.

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"You must call on me if there is anything I can do for you." He smiled and closed the door and went away.

Downstairs he telephoned Clyde's office, and they told him he had left two months before and they had heard nothing from him.

Bess stared at the door after Mr. Carroll closed it. She sat without moving until his footsteps died away and then got up and began to walk rapidly up and down the room. She was trapped. She was not taken in by his smiles and heartiness. He had guessed, and in a little while he would know surely. He would come back after her, and then she did not know what would happen. If she could only imagine what might happen it would not be so terrifying. It seemed to her that her mind scuttled around in her head like something shut up in a dark place, feeling desperately for some way out. There was no Clyde now to whom she could slip away. She must stay there trapped until they chose to come and take her away.

"They'll think I'm crazy," she thought, "not to have done something instead of just going on like this."

She stopped and pressed her hands to her eyes. "They will think I'm crazy. Maybe I am; I don't know. They'll lock me up. They'll take the baby away and lock me up. I was a fool not to get away in time. Now they wouldn't let me go, not if I walked out quietly, past the desk, as though nothing was wrong? No, they'd know. They'd stop me and bring me back. O God! O God! I'll be locked up in a room like this all the rest of my life, alone in the dark and cold. O God! please!"

The room grew very dark. Bess kept looking toward the door to see if they had come for her, and after a while she could no longer distinguish it from the walls. Only the window by which she had been sitting, with its shade rolled up, was a gray oblong of dirty light outlined on the darkness. No light came through it. She could make out nothing in the

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room. The chairs and tables, Liliás, all were gone and she was alone. Now they could open the door softly and she would never see them come. The floor creaked and she stood still to listen. There were steps coming down the hall; she could hear them above the loud painful beating of her heart.

Panic seized her, blind and hideous. She stumbled to the window and tried to open it. She would not be trapped like this; she would open it and lean out and call for help—at least she would breathe the free air. The window was stuck fast, swollen with the long dampness. Bess stood on a chair and forced it up, beating upwards with her palms against the frame.

The steps came down the hall and passed her door. She did not hear them. She was leaning out, the fresh air and the cold drift of rain delicious on her face. Liliás saw her, a high grotesque figure against the dim light. Wild with bewilderment and fright, she ran across the dark room to her mother and caught pleadingly at her dress. Bess tore her skirt free, screaming, and flung herself out.

PART FOUR

NONA

Chapter One

MR. CARROLL found Callie's letters in Bess's desk and sent her a telegram. He sent one to Clyde, too, in the postmaster's care, and it was returned to him three weeks later in an envelope, marked unknown and worn and creased with passing from hand to hand.

A week passed before he had an answer from Callie. Telegrams for the village went to Melford and were sent over by mail. His wire came late Saturday afternoon, and Monday morning the clerk slipped it into an envelope and mailed it when he went out to lunch. It was Friday before Callie found some one going into Melford who could send her reply from the office there.

Callie wired: "Send Liliias on at once. Will meet train in Melford." There was not a word about money for the hotel bill or for her ticket or even for the expenses of Bess's funeral. It had not occurred to the Floods to think of any of these things. They had spoken of sending for Bess's body, but Edward Gay said, "I don't suppose old Ellis will want to give her Christian burial." They did not believe him, of course, but they saw all at once that things would be complicated, and it seemed best to leave her where she was. Mr. Carroll crumpled the telegram in his hand and said, aloud, "Of all the goddamn nerve!" But he was relieved to hear anything from them, for he had been afraid the relatives meant to saddle him with the child.

Although he had already done more than anyone had a right to expect of him, and in spite of his fear that she would cry or make a scene, he took Liliias to the train himself. "I

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might as well go ahead and do it up brown," he thought. So he took her down and put her in her seat and went to stand on the platform where he could see her through the window. He walked up and down, looking in at her, thinking that she was very small and that she moved about very little for a child. At last he spoke to the conductor, "Don't overlook the little girl." He put a bill into the conductor's hand: "See that she gets something to eat when she ought to." He looked in at her again and hesitated, groping. He had no children, and his own childhood seemed very far away. He could not imagine what she was feeling, how she would manage on the train all alone. He said: "There'll be other things she wants, maybe . . . and see she gets to bed sometime."

"Sure," the conductor said. "I got kids of my own."

Mr. Carroll beamed approvingly, his confidence in the world restored. "Ah, that's right!" he said. "Then I needn't tell *you*!"

Edward Gay met Liliás in Melford and drove her over to the village. Halfway up the long hill they came to a fence of gray logs, and he pointed with his whip and said, "That's my land."

His words, as casual as if he had said, "That's my room," made a new picture of the world for Liliás. She looked about her. She saw a field of tall grass spotted thickly with dandelions, and running through it a creek where a colt was drinking. Under a tree in the shade were two red cows. She knew by name nothing that she saw—not the animals nor the creek nor the common yellow flowers. Above the field, beyond another fence, lay the brown plowed earth of a spring garden pierced by delicate spearlike rows of green. Against the side of the house at the top of the hill, white and lovely on its stained drab wall, were three apple trees in full bloom. "Is that yours?" Liliás asked him, and he said yes. She gazed at the hillside and the three blossoming trees. What

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she saw was part of the real world, a piece of the very fabric of the earth. It was as though Edward had pointed his whip at a bit of the sky and said, "That's mine."

The front door stood open into a wide shallow hall that was the real living-room of the house. The staircase curved up at the back, and under it, facing the door, was a sofa where a little girl lay asleep. She was about Liliás's age, very thin, with a small, pretty, sunburnt face and long yellow curls. Edward Gay called: "Kibby! Kibby!" and poked at her with his stick. But she slept on, or pretended to sleep, only moaning and twisting under his prodding. There seemed to be no one else in the house.

Liliás was very tired. She went over to a big leather chair that stood in one corner of the hall, which was also a corner of the house, between two windows. Through the side window she could see the road where it ran between the white fences of two more big houses before it curved into the village street; through the front one she looked straight across to the old brick church opposite, and followed the short stretch of road back until it dipped down the hill. There were trees around the house and along the road, but from both windows the outlook was clear and whoever sat there could see everything that passed. Edward said, "The Gays all come back to that chair to die." Facing the chair across the hall was the doorway to a tall dark parlor. In there the floor was carpeted, but the floor of the hall and the steps going up in the back were of bare wood with no stain or polish, worn to a smoothness and luster that must be soft even to the touch. Liliás bent over and touched the floor with her finger, and Mr. Gay smiled and said: "I like it too; but respectable folk think it heathenish to walk on naked wood."

He glanced again at the sleeping child and called out, "Laura!" Then he pounded on the floor with his stick. At last an old Negro woman came down the steps slowly. She steadied herself by the banister and the long toes of her flat

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bare feet curled over, gripping the steps' edges. "Hush 'at racket," she said. "How you know yo' baby ain't sleepin'?"

Edward pointed with his stick: "In God's name! Can't I go out the house without you taking off your shoes? Where's Miss Laura?"

"She's took Billy over to her ma's."

"Well. Where's my supper?"

"Supper?" she cried, indignantly. "You a fine one talkin' about supper! Who got time to cook fo' you, I like to know, wit' yo' po' little baby dyin'?"

"That's all right," he said. "I'm hungry, so get along with you."

"Miss Laura didn't say nothin' about no supper."

"Well," he said, "we know you didn't plan on going without, yourself, or leaving Kibby go hungry."

He went back through the parlor to the dining-room and sat down at the bare table. Liliás followed him, and he reached out and pulled up a chair for her. The old woman, moving slowly and sullenly, put a plate of cold ham, some thick slices of bread, and half a pie on the uncovered table. She brought coffee in a tin pot still red hot from the stove, and looked around for a place to set it down. Finally she went to the china-closet and got out a plate. It was a pretty fragile one, garlanded with little pale flowers. When she put the pot down it cracked across with a sharp clear sound. Edward had watched her silently and now he laughed and said, "Damn you for a careless fool!"

The old Negress sat down with them on one of the horse-hair chairs that were ranged stiffly against the wall. She fell at once into a doze, and her flaccid body and turned-in naked feet mocked the chair's primness.

Edward Gay helped Liliás to meat and bread and pie and pushed her plate toward her. He ate swiftly and silently, bent low over his food, and when he sat back his plate was as clean as if a dog had licked it. He took up his knife and

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struck it sharply against his cup, and the old colored woman woke with a start and began to clear the table.

"You know this is Miss Bess's little girl," Edward said to her. "Well, Chloe, what do you think of her?"

She paused in her work and looked at Liliás solemnly. "She's a real nice-lookin' chile, but she can't touch my baby."

"That's my daughter Kibby," Edward said. "She's the apple of Chloe's eye. All the rest of us can go to hell and welcome. She is the only one of my children who has managed to survive her adoration. I've had three sons born living," he said, "and they have all died under Chloe's tender care except the last, and he's dying. She's a female Moloch."

Chloe listened carefully, her lips moving after him upon his words. When he ceased speaking she said, gravely, "May the good Lord shame you, Edward Gay, for the words you jus' now said."

Hugh Tidball came in unannounced and stood leaning in the door. He was a tall, youngish man, already stooped and shambling, very thin, with dry lined skin and soft, thin, fly-away hair and deep-set pocketed eyes. Everything about him was the same dull even brown, so that he had an autumnal look, like parched grass or a dry leaf or a brittle wind-stripped twig. People constantly used these symbols to describe him. They said, "Hugh's mighty dried-up-looking; he's thinf as a stick; he looks like one good puff would blow him away."

Hugh Tidball put down his bag on a chair near the door and came over and leaned on the table. The bag was the same one his sister Maude had given him when he graduated twelve years ago, so he would have something nice, a real doctor's bag, to take with him to Baltimore. It was worn now, and there were gray patches on it where the cheap imitation leather had rubbed away. He said, leaning over the table braced on his thin arms, his big bony hands gripping the edge: "How do, Edward! Kibby's out in the hall, asleep.

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It seems to me she's all the time sleepin'. Does she eat regular and sleep good at night? The way she does don't seem natural for a child her age."

Edward Gay waved his hand at Chloe. "She eats when she's hungry or when there's anything cooked up, and goes to bed when she's a mind to, like every child born in this house. But I've got no quarrel with her sleeping all day if she likes; it's the least aggravating thing a child can do, to my way of thinking."

"I'll keep my eye on her," Hugh Tidball said, straightening up and reaching for his bag. "How's Billy gettin' on? How's he been today? I'll go right on up, Clo, if you'll just let Miss Laura know I'm here."

Chloe said, triumphant at this humbling of science: "Miss Laura ain't here. She's done took Billy home."

Hugh turned and said to Edward, in a high, anxious voice, "You all surely haven't moved that baby?"

Chloe said softly, with malice: "There ain't a better person anywheres than Miss Flood for doctorin' babies. She's had seven of her own and raised up all but one, and he oney died when he was eight year ole."

"Well, Hugh," Edward Gay said, "if the moving don't do it, Mamma's concoctions will sure be the end of him. You might as well go 'long home and let the women finish it up amongst 'em. Life and death," he said, "they deal 'em both out to us. Well, who has a better right?"

Suddenly he turned on Chloe and thrust his finger at her. "So while I'm out of the house you pester Laura into dragging Billy over to her mother's! I can hear you nagging at her. And all so's you can shift the work, you lazy slut!"

"Lazy!" she cried, and thumped with her clenched fists on her knees. "When I bin up wit' 'at chile night an' day, an' waitin' on the lot of you besides! Many a time I done my work wit' 'at chile on my arm—handed supper wit' 'at po'

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lamb cryin' in my arms! You wid yo' breakfas' an' yo' dinner an' yo' supper; yo' 'this house is a pigpen' an' 'you-all keep 'at chile quiet.' What you know 'bout work, I like to know!"

Kibby came in in the midst of the old woman's tirade and sat herself languidly in her lap. Chloe gathered her in and sat back on her chair. "Now let somebody else take they turn," she muttered.

Hugh Tidball said, pacifically: "I just saw Nona down the street. Maybe you better try to keep her here awhile if she can stay, to look after these children. Now Laura's home, she better stay there. You can't keep draggin' a baby with typhoid back and forth." He glanced at Liliás. "This one don't look too strong, neither. I hope to goodness you don't have these two down sick."

"Let Chloe nurse 'em, then," Edward Gay said, laughing.

Chloe sprang up, dropping Kibby from her lap: "You say you leave these chillun here, wit' Miss Laura gone? No indeedy! How you think I'm goin' to ketch up wit' my work? Why, Lord! there ain't a clean rag between you! No clo'es. No sheet fo' the baid! Where you goin' to put these chillun to lay down widout no sheet? No, suh. Miss Laura no sooner put foot out the house than I sent off word to Miss Nona."

Nona Lucas bustled in, the small sharp clatter of her heels echoing through the house. She was barely thirty, but there was already a middle-aged look to her. She had faded and hardened. Her fair skin was wind-burned and her bright hair dull and neat; all her soft brief prettiness had rubbed away. In ten years of marriage she had shed her youth like a dress grown tight at hip and armhole, and was plainly more comfortable without it. She wore a lavender tailor-made, very mannish, with a velvet collar and notched lapels, with a sweeping skirt and big ballooning sleeves. Around her neck was a starched white stock with a whip scarfpin, and a

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round varnished black sailor topped her primly netted hair. She cried: "Well, here I am, Clo! How do, brother! Howdy, Hugh! I haven't laid eyes on you for a coon's age, but then we all keep well out our way, stock included." Hugh winced at her last words, but Nona's tone was without malice; she had no time for that. She cried, "How you all like my new coatsuit I got over at Raphael's?"

"I'm damned," Edward said, "if Ivy Lucas don't put his mark on you plainer every day you live. You couldn't tell you from a Lucas now, born and bred."

Nona laughed. "Oh, there's lots worse than Lucases. Anyhow, they know how to get butter for their bread. And as for marks, so long as it isn't your kind, Ed Gay, that gets you with a child regularly every ten months, why, I count myself luckier than some women!" She laughed with obvious relish of her wit and drew her hand across her mouth like a man after a drink.

Edward said, coolly: "Life in the barnyard, my dear Nona, hasn't noticeably improved your taste."

Nona did not heed him. She clattered over to Liliias, crying: "So this is Bess's baby! I'm your aunt Nona, honey. Here, let me have a good look at you." She felt over her with her little hard brown paws as though she tested the firmness of fruit, and prodded her deftly like a fowl she was choosing out for Sunday dinner. "Bless me if she isn't Flood all over! Well, I did hope that along with that no-count Cover blood, your dad, while he was about it, would pass on some of his meat as well."

She turned around, still keeping her hold on Liliias. "Ed, I'm going to take these chickens off your hands. I brought the big buggy so there'd be plenty of room for their things. Show some gumption now, Kibby, and get your clothes together. You better get Clo to give you all the clean things you got."

"God knows she's got aplenty clothes if they was jus'

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washed an' pressed. But I reckon they can get done up easy where you're goin'. I lay to it Miss Nona's got herself plenty of help!"

"Clean or dirty, get what she's got together without any more talk. Come along, babies, hustle up. You bring Liliass's grips out with you, Edward, and put 'em in the back seat. There's room for both these skinnybedinks up front with me. Well, brother, I'll keep 'em as long as you can spare 'em. I guess it had better be until after the funeral."

Hugh Tidball protested: "Now, Nona! Billy's still got a chance."

"Foot!" Nona cried. "Don't talk to me, Hugh Tidball! I just saw that child!"

"There's always a chance, especially with a baby. There's no computing the punishment a baby can take and still come through. No one alive can tell for sure about babies," Hugh Tidball said, mildly obstinate.

Chloe brought Kibby's clothes down in a small straw hamper. She said: "I hope to the good Lord 'at baby don't die. Anyways, till he's done nursin'. Mebbe Miss Laura'd have the same luck she had with Kibby here, and not get that way right off agen, poor soul. If Billy dies there's goin' to be one more baby this time next year, sure."

They went out to the buggy, Hugh Tidball dangling Kibby's little hamper in his free hand. Edward Gay lifted Liliass in beside Nona, and Kibby squeezed in after her. Nona flicked the flies off the horse with the whip, and Liliass looked at it curiously, and she gave it to her to hold. "You can chase the flies if you want to, and touch up Trooper if he goes too slow."

Nona gathered up the reins and slapped the old horse's fat hindquarters smartly, and they rolled down the driveway and through the village and out onto the white country road. The yellow fringe of the buggy top swung futilely over their

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heads and the glowing ball of the setting sun shone into their eyes. The carriage bowled along in a high cloud of glittering dust. Nona sat up straight and stiff, squinting ahead, slapping the reins briskly and ineffectually, while the fat old horse with his head hanging trotted steadily toward home.

Chapter Two

NONA's house was built on rising ground, and stood, white and square and shadeless, overlooking the road. All around it ran a white paling fence, and the gate into the lane between the house and barn was painted white, and the garden fence, and even the high board fence that closed in the barnyard. Ivy Lucas had built the house when he married, ten years before, and he kept it up well, but it was the bareness rather than the paint that made it look spandy new. The grass in the big empty front yard was clipped, and there were two round plots of stiff red and yellow flowers in front of the house on either side of the path. There was a thick woods on one side and at the back of the house, but there were no trees in the yard except one huge oak down in one corner by the road, circled with a whitewashed seat. Nona liked to look at her place from the road, green and white, clean and trim and empty, in the hot glare of the sun.

A narrow porch ran all around the house, closed off by a lattice on the kitchen side. In front it was screened by thick vines. One vine bore small white feathery flowers with no smell to them, and the other little clusters of hard red berries. The children liked to paint their lips and cheeks with the red juice of the berries, and Nona sometimes stained her lips with it, too, laughing at herself. It did not hurt their lips, but when they smeared too much on their cheeks their faces broke out with great white painless welts like water blisters.

The house was square and divided by a central hall; on one side was the dining-room and kitchen, and on the other the

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parlor and a big back bedroom. It was a comfortable house, well and solidly built, and furnished with good solid stuff made to last a lifetime. Nona was proud of it. Everything was bought new at the time of her marriage; she prided herself on having taken nothing with her from Gays Park. But when she had been married three years she came home one day with two pictures and hung them together over the sofa in the parlor. One was a portrait of the John Gay who had been a royal governor, and the other was of their coat-of-arms. Sometimes she knelt upon the sofa and read aloud the formal phrases of the charter, tracing the difficult script with her finger and sounding the peculiarities of the spelling: "To all and Singuler to whom these p'sents shall come Sr John Boroughs Kt. Gart; principall Kinge of Armes of Englishmen sendeth greeting. Know yee that John Gay Gent sonne of Edward Gay Gent the only sonne of John Gay of Gays Park in the county of Southampton Gent, who beare for his Coate Armour Gules three . . ." When she reached this point Nona always murmured "Et cet, et cet," with little impatient movements of her hands. She could not make out many of the words that followed, and she had no notion of their meaning. She dismissed thus the description of the arms and quarterings and hurried on to the sentences she liked best of all: "which Armes they and there Ancestors have borne tyme out of mind." She chanted the phrases, ending with a fine sonority: "In Witness where of I have onto these presents affixed the seale of Myne office and subscribed my name Dated the Eight Day of December and in the year of Our Lord God 1633. Sr John Borough Garter." She demanded of her husband, "Don't that give you a kind of prickly feeling?"

Ivy Lucas said: "He surely took care to get it all down in writing before he came over. I reckon he wanted to make certain he'd take his rightful place in the high society they must of had around here in those days. There must of been

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all of three families in St. Marys County, not counting Indians. It'd been a mighty bad thing if they hadn't known just how to rank each other."

Nona said: "Well, it's mighty nice to know who you come down from."

Ivy said: "To my mind, it's better to go up than come down, but then Lucases always were just common people."

Nona laughed. "Go on with you! Trying to make fun of your wife! Still, I'm going to have them copied off for Kibby. It's nice for a girl to have things like that. They take stock in them, too, when they get older."

Nona did not know why she set so much store by those pictures. One day she noticed them as if for the first time, and carried them off. She never knew if Edward missed them. After she had knelt up to look at them and reread the words of Sr John Borough Garter, she went about her work with a faintly puzzled frown. "Pshaw!" she said to herself. "It's natural for people to begin to take stock in such things when they get older."

Upstairs she had four big bedrooms, all furnished alike to accommodate the greatest number of people. In each was a double bed and two iron cots. Nona and Ivy had one front room and Byrd and Aunt Vi the other, and the two back rooms were kept for guests. "When you love company like I do," Nona said, "and are kind of cramped for room, you have to make up on beds. Like this I can take care of eight people without anybody doubling up with us or with Aunt Vi and the baby, and that's not counting the extra cot I can set up in the upstairs hall."

Ivy's father and mother lived with them, and his Aunt Vi, who helped out in the kitchen. Nona left everything in the house to Aunt Vi and to the colored girl, Bonnie. She sometimes fed the chickens herself, or helped Bonnie's brother Jim with the milking or garden work, but mostly she kept her time free to run here and there on the farm, to

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drive down to the orchard to keep an eye on the tenant, or to look in on the hotel in the village. Ivy thought there was no one to touch her, and she did as she liked and prided herself on being a fine manager; but when it came to work the tenant had the orchard and Ivy's old-maid sisters, Miss Sarah and Miss Till, ran the hotel, and all the regular chores of the house and dairy and the care of the little boy, Byrd, fell to Bonnie and Aunt Vi.

Aunt Vi knew she was put upon and she nagged and grumbled, but she had to put up with Nona's high-handed ways. She had only one way of getting back at Nona. She would choose her time, and when there was a chicken frying or a pie in the oven, she would go out to the garden-house and stay as long as she dared. She knew very well that Bonnie, who could do nothing alone, would run for help to Nona. It eased her considerably to sit there, taking her own time, picturing Nona finishing up the work she had left. Sometimes, just to devil them all, she would leave up the little flag on the back gate which signaled that some one was in the garden-house, and disappear into the smokehouse or dairy. So they never knew for sure, and often waited when there was no need to, or took a chance and went all the long way through the back woods to find the door barred against them. One such successful trick put Aunt Vi in a good humor for several days, and she would turn out pies and cakes without complaint.

Nona got along well with the two other old people—Gran'ma and Gran'pa, she called them. Gran'pa was a quiet, dirty old man who had a little room of his own built out on the upstairs back porch, and he never troubled anyone. Nona did not interfere with people who kept out of her way, and he and his room were left to be as dirty as he liked. He kept all kinds of litter—old boxes and stacks of newspapers and magazines, and the mice rustled them noisily at night. He had nuts and apples drying, and odds and ends of food he

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had hidden away and forgotten, which drew all kinds of vermin. But Nona said, tolerantly: "Let him have his trash if he wants it; it keeps bugs away from the rest of the house."

Gran'ma was a grand old woman, still stout and handsome. Ivy had got his sharpness and his pleasant ways from her, as well as his red hair and fresh, porcine good looks. Years ago she caught Gran'pa carrying on with a woman and she fell into a splendid rage and put him out of her bedroom. He had never got back, and so she had only three children and kept her health and looks into her old age. She had had her way all her life, but she was good-humored and lively and she and Nona got on well with enough people to wait on them both. Gran'ma had the big room downstairs, back of the parlor, with a huge four-poster bed piled high with clean gay quilts and a little dressing-room of her own with her washstand and commode behind a fringed curtain. She had a big stove, so that in winter she was snug and tight, and all the family except Gran'pa sat in there with her on winter evenings.

It was late in the evening when Nona got home with the children, and she took them straight upstairs to one of the back bedrooms, and Bonnie brought them up a round tin tub and a kettle of hot water. She put them down by the washstand and set a screen around them. Kibby took first turn and Liliias could hear her splashing and the water spattering on the floor. Then Liliias bathed, and when she was through the matting was wet clear out to the middle of the room, but no one seemed to mind the mess.

When they were in their nightgowns Aunt Vi plodded up with supper on a tray. Nona came in to sit with them and talked a great deal through mouthfuls of biscuits and preserves. "You'll have a good time here," she said to Liliias. "Kibby does. I love having you and you can do anything you want that don't look like it would kill you. I believe in let-

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ting children look out for themselves; they have more fun and it saves a lot of bother. Byrd will show you around tomorrow, and Kibby knows the whole farm like her own home. But listen here, you two. Don't go over on the far side of that hill where Jim is plowing, without Byrd is with you. Jim's a good nigger, but you can't take chances with any of 'em. You haven't got to understand; just watch out what I tell you. And now you better go off to sleep, even if it is kind of early."

She kissed them both and gave them meaningless little pats with her firm brown paws, and piled up the dirty dishes on a tray and went out, pulling the door to behind her with her foot.

Chapter Three

A ROOSTER in the woods outside their window gave his shrill sudden call and Liliás woke and saw that it was still night. She turned over to go back to sleep, but before she closed her eyes the darkness had grayed. She watched the night dissolve, and the clear morning, unshadowed as yet by the sun, came in through the tall curtainless windows and filled the room. Then she saw that Kibby was awake, too. The two children lay on their sides, very still, and stared at each other with wide, reticent eyes.

Silence was all about them, and then, as suddenly as the day had broken, the house awoke. Where an instant before there had been no sound now there was a clatter in the kitchen and the noise of doors opening and of talking and of footsteps on the stairs. Kibby flung back her covers and sat up on the side of her cot. Liliás got up, too, and they sat facing each other, the cool matting prickling their bare feet. Liliás felt a sharp pinprick on her ankle and drew up her feet. Kibby said: "That's fleas. Hot weather the matting's full of them." Liliás looked down to see what fleas were, but she could see nothing. Kibby slapped at her legs and cried, "Drat the pesky things!" in her little high pettish voice.

Finally they drew up their legs and dressed, sitting modestly back to back, cross-legged on the beds. Before they were quite dressed Aunt Vi came out on the downstairs back porch and rang a loud solemn bell.

Breakfast was half over when they came down. Nona sat at one end of the table, her black sailor already pinned to her neat hair, and handed plates of bacon and fried apples.

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Gran'ma sat at the other end and poured strong coffee into thick white cups and ladled out sugar and lumpy yellow cream with a careless, liberal hand. The little girls were alone on their side of the table. Across from them Gran'pa sat by Nona, in a clean blue collarless shirt half hidden by his beard; and by him Ivy Lucas with a red tie and a slick red head; and next to Gran'ma, Byrd Lucas, a solid sun-burnt little boy nine years old. Aunt Vi passed the hot biscuits, moving slowly around the table with her soft dragging step, muttering to herself. When she reached Kibby and Liliás she raised her voice to a low whine: "Down kinder late this mornin', wasn't you? Well, I don't grudge it to you. I'd like to lay in bed some mornin', myself, while somebody else took a turn at breakfast."

There were dishes of honey and preserves on the table, and Nona plopped some of each on their plates, and Ivy Lucas across from them split open his hot biscuits and drowned them in a flood of warm syrup.

After breakfast Byrd drove his father to the store. Nona gave him a long list of things to do for her, and called him back to pin it into his pocket with a safety pin taken from her belt. He spit on the path when he thought he was safely away, and cursed, "Good dang!" But Nona heard him and ran after him and gave him a smart slap on the side of his head.

Kibby and Liliás went with Nona for flowers. It took them a good while to get to the end of the vegetable-garden where the flower-beds were, for Nona continually stopped to finger a plant or to flick off a bug or to weed, or just to feel the earth, stooping over to pat it with her hand, taking a little into her palm and crumbling it through her small, hard, brown fingers.

After the flowers were cut and given to Aunt Vi to put in water, they went around to the front of the house where Gran'pa sat in a rocker in the sun, and Nona wrapped him

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in a big coarse towel and clipped his hair and beard with the garden shears. Lillas and Kibby stood still to see the short white locks fall onto the towel, staring at the back of Gran'-pa's neck, crisscrossed by wrinkles into tiny glazed squares like gingerbread.

Then Nona turned them over to Bonnie and Aunt Vi. They watched Bonnie catch and kill a chicken. She wrung its neck and they laughed to see her swing it round and round till it fell flapping and headless on the ground. They sat on the steps of the kitchen porch and watched her pluck it. When it was picked clean she slit it and thrust in her dark hand and pulled out its entrails, throwing part into the pan beside her and part on the ground, where the dogs leaped upon it and gobbled it up.

They went with Aunt Vi through the orchard back of the house to see if the strawberries on the little hill beyond were ripe for picking. "Mebbe I can manage a pie even if they ain't so ripe, with using lots of sugar. Ivy and Nona are two to like their vittles, if there's somebody else to cook 'em."

The orchard sloped up to the little hill and they could look out over the farm. On one side they could see Jim plowing the big hill over behind the barn, his blue shirt bright against the dark-red furrows he opened on the green hillside. All along their way on the other side there ran a dark wall of trees. When Lillas looked into the shadow of the woods the whole world seemed to darken as though a cloud had covered the sun. The trees frightened her and she thought that she would always be afraid to walk through them alone.

Aunt Vi left them to play in the tall grass on the little hill. They picked the fragile field flowers and Kibby taught Lillas to braid them into wilting chains. They sat apart, and each one ravaged a wide circle round her, stripping it of flowers and of the half-ripe berries, biting out the red side

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sweetened by the sun and spitting the hard green leavings back into the grass.

"Come home through the woods," Aunt Vi had said. "The noon sun's hot on your head, as early in the year as it is." Kibby led the way along the narrow woods path. Liliás walked warily in the middle of it, her arms held to her sides. She could not overcome her fear of the trees, so many and so close, and everything she saw was strange: the dimness of the woods and the sudden patches of sunlight brighter than the sunshine outside, that flickered on the dark earth, and the constant dance and whisper of secret life under the surface stillness.

Kibby cried out with delight, "There's my last year's moss house as good as new!" She pointed out where it lay and brushed off the leaves and twigs so Liliás could see the velvety spread of moss. "Let's find you one!" she cried.

They found a fine place farther on: a small smooth clearing in the undergrowth with a natural entrance between a tree stump and a jutting rock. The stump and rock were covered with that bright thin film of moss that tears like green gauze. Kibby said: "It's a nicer place than mine. It's the nicest one I've ever found."

They scoured the woods near by for moss and carried it back until the little clearing was carpeted with it up to bushes' edge. Liliás forgot her fear and went far in among the trees in search of choice patches for her house. Before Kibby left to go back to her own place, she showed her how to make dolls from twigs and dress them in a leaf tied with strong grass.

Liliás made a whole family of dolls and found a home for them in a hollow under the stump. At last she lay down on the soft springy moss with the sunshine warm on her back and fell asleep. When she woke she was in the midst of a terrible silence and the trees had pressed in close, so she saw nothing all around her but their brown trunks rising out

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of the brown sunflecked earth. She was terrified by the dim crowding memories of dangers she had never known. She cried out to Kibby and knew an instant's piercing terror that her voice would make no sound in the stillness.

Kibby came running down the path. "My! you have got a good place!" she said, a little envious. "Let's hurry. I expect we're awful late."

When dinner was over they went with Byrd to see Jim plowing. At the barn Byrd deserted them. He went into the granary, a cool empty shed built on stilts, carpeted with a sweet-smelling litter of last winter's seed. "I'm not going to fool around with girls," he told them. "I'm going in here and have me a smoke." They peeped at him through the half-shut door and saw him sit down with his back to the wall, his legs thrust out before him, and, magnificently adult, take an old broken pipe from his pocket, pack it and light it, striking the match on his thumb nail.

At the fence behind the barn Kibby and Liliias paused. They looked at each other questioningly for an instant without speaking, and then climbed the fence and made their way over the heavy lumps of red upturned earth, trembling with a delicious trepidation.

They sat down in the grass at the end of a furrow and watched the plow. Jim made one more turn and pulled up beside them, gaily quick to take a holiday. "Lawdy, it's hot!" he said, laughing. He took off his felt hat and wiped his forehead, and when he shook his hand the sweat snapped off his fingers.

He was a tall young Negro with broad shoulders and a fine, strong, slender back. But his small head was so flat on the crown that it looked as though it were sliced off above the brow, and his face receded sharply above and below his great, out-thrust, laughing mouth. When he and Bonnie moved they put white folk to shame with their free bodies and their lithe, rhythmic stride; but when they stood still

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their whole body was humbled. Their heads rolled and their arms hung lax and dangling, and their straight legs shifted and splayed under their weight. When they stood still, waiting for their orders, their whole being matched their dull face and misshapen head. They would stand so, and then as if set free from an enchantment, spring off with the quick easy grace of animals.

Jim stood beside the children and scratched the thin nap on his sweating head. "It's might hot fo' this time a year," he said, still laughing. "Ony the Lawd know what he got in store fo' us come summer-time." He coughed and turned his head and spit out on the ground. "Cough so much, mus' be I'm getting ole folks' sickness," he said and laughed.

Bonnie and Jim lived down the road in one of a cluster of cabins built in a hollow tramped naked of grass, which was a red swamp after a rain. The Negroes raised nothing on their bit of poor land which could no longer bear even grass and weeds. The young ones worked out on the neighboring farms and brought home enough to feed the old people and the little children. The generation before had gone North during those years when there was a great exodus of Negroes from the state, and those who did not die had come home broken by the bitter climate and the shut-in city life. They sat wrapped in quilts in the sunshine, too weak to do anything but mind the babies rolling in the red clay; and every winter, shivering in the airless crowded cabins, more of them coughed themselves to death. The women held on longer than the men. The sickest of them managed a few days' work in the busy seasons; they came to help with the heavy washing in the fall and spring, and with the preserving and when there were the extra hands to feed in harvest-time. In this way they picked up a few dollars for tobacco and patent medicine, and the white people came to know them and would help them over the hard winter with gifts of food and wood and clothes. But the old men were beyond

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all thought of work. They sat in the sun or over the little stove, whittling toys for the children, smoking and spitting and telling long godless lies, so outlived the women two to one.

Jim coughed and spit again. He could think of nothing more to say and prepared reluctantly to get on with his work. After he had gone the children lay flat on their backs and looked up at the sky from under the shadow of their arms.

Later Jim stopped beside them again. "I'm quittin' early today," he said. "I got to go over town fo' Miss Nona. You-all want to go to put up the horses?"

He lifted them up on Girl and Trooper and let them ride the tired horses out of the field. They plodded down the hill so slowly that even Liliias was not afraid. After he unhitched them at the barn he led them across the road to the pasture, with the children still on their backs. He let them stop to drink at the creek in the lane, and when they bent their heads to the water the little girls shrieked and giggled and clung with their hands and knees.

They walked slowly back from the pasture and sat on the bench that circled the big tree at the bottom of the yard. Kibby said: "It's a long time yet till supper." They sat, swinging their feet, waiting for something to happen to round out the day.

Bonnie came by on her way to the spring for water cress for supper, and they went with her, each holding a hand, walking slowly and swaying a little as they walked, in time with the falling day. The air was cooler and lighter now, and with the sinking of the sun all the colors had sobered and grown very clear, and the farm noises were separate and small and sounded far away.

They went across the road with Bonnie and down through the field to the spring under its little wooden house. They could look back and see the dark figures of Gran'ma and Nona like dolls on the front porch, and they could look up

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at the house across the way, at the top of the hill which rose out of this field, and see the people there, too. Up there was the small sound of a baby crying, and the tiny figure of a woman ran across the yard to the house.

"No wonder 'at baby cry," Bonnie said. "Lissen, you all. You know what? Miz Smiley up yonder, she read somewhere in this here city paper 'bout somebody wantin' butter made a mother's milk. Hey-uh!" She lapsed into soft wild laughter. "What she do but squeeze herse'f dry as a cheese an' churn it up an' sen' it off to the city! Her po' little baby have to take calf's leavin's! Some folks!" she cried, gaily. "Did you-all ever hear the beat!"

They listened to the soft chant of Bonnie's voice while the incomprehensible tale colored all of life with a pleasant mystery. They did not understand it and they had no desire to. The story was all of a piece with the fading day.

After supper Nona and Ivy led the way into the parlor to hear the gramophone. All of them crowded in, and it was hot in the room with only one window open because of draughts. Nona fanned herself with a heart-shaped palm-leaf fan, stirring up a ripple of sluggish air. "My gracious! but it's warm!" Nobody minded. They sat close together, away from the window, for everyone wanted to be near the gramophone.

Ivy changed the records. They were singing ones, and his audience strained to catch the words which, once heard, sent them into fits of laughter. He played "Row, Row, Row," "I'm Afraid to Go Home in the Dark," "My Wife's Gone to the Country," "I Can Dance with Anybody but My Wife." He sat close to the machine, his head bent so that his ear nearly touched the flaring horn, and sang the words which long habit had made intelligible to him, and hummed the parts he had given up trying to make out. The others sat far forward on their chairs, and when Ivy sang the daring

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words Nona glanced around, winking pertly, and Gran'ma cried, shaking with laughter: "I declare! I do declare!"

When Gran'ma laughed her lips thinned and curved inward over her toothless gums and she looked like an old woman. But she was still grand and handsome, her face round and high-colored, though faintly wrinkled and pulpy like an old apple, with soft-looking brown splotches here and there on the fresh pink skin; and her laughter was gay and earthy like a young woman's.

The little girls sat together on the slippery sofa, which pricked their bare legs between their drawers and stockings. They were warm and drowsy, and their middles were deliciously distended, for they had been stuffed at supper. "I do love," Gran'ma said, repeatedly, "to see men and children eat." They were full of ham and hot bread and jelly and cold pie left from dinner.

Byrd had disappeared. "Up to some devilment," Nona said, tranquilly. "He hangs around with the little niggers now—that's the latest. Well, give him his head, I say, and let him work it out of him early."

Aunt Vi sat a little apart, her hands folded on her high stomach. She whined softly: "Why, Nona, anybody'd think that child was a man grown to hear you talk, when he ain't hardly out of didies."

Gran'ma said, with her rich laughter, "A man-child is up to tricks in his cradle!"

Ivy began to sing, rolling and rounding his voice in imitation of the singer's: "Oh, there's no place like home, sweet home, but I'm afraid to go home in the dark!" They melted into comfortable laughter.

Gran'pa sat on the porch alone. He had pulled his chair close to the window so that, inside, they could see his head lifted to catch the music. Gran'ma went over to the window and rapped sharply on the glass. "Come along in, Mr. Lucas. Make yourself sociable—do!"

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The old man started and stammered out: "No. No. No, thanky, ma'am."

Nona called out, cheerfully, winking at the others, "You enjoy the night air, don't you, Gran'pa?"

He twisted round in his chair and peered in at the window. "Yes," he said, gratefully. "Yes, that's it, daughter. It's a real putty evening," he went on, with a wistful hope of further notice. "It'll be putty indeed when the moon's come up. It's full moon this evening." But no one heard him. They were not thinking about him any longer.

Ivy put on "Everybody's Doing It." He called out: "Come here, Kibby. Let's you and me show these old folks a thing or two about dancing."

He danced with Kibby, hopping rapidly around the room, swaying from side to side. "Hey, Mamma, what do you think of these new fancy steps?"

"They don't reely dance thataway, do they, son? Not right out in front of people? Well, I declare!" She laughed until there were tears on her pink withered cheeks.

They played the record through again. Kibby's cheeks burned and she spun round and round, clinging to Ivy's waist, screaming with excitement.

Nona said: "Look at Ivy with that child, will you? I vow I believe he'd prance in front of a three-weeks-old girl-baby!"

Gran'ma said: "And don't you ever believe Miss Kibby ain't one to enjoy it! Look at her. She's got herself all of a fever, showing off. There! Off to bed with you now, Kibby. That's enough of monkeyshines for one evening." She looked round for Lillas. "Why, if the poor child ain't asleep aready!"

Lillas had slid half off onto the floor, and she slept with her head against the sofa, pillowed on her arm. A little color had come into her face and she looked softer and happier. Nona said: "It's good we got her first. It'll do her good to be away from craziness for a change."

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They roused her and took her up to bed. It was the end of her first full day at home. She had known the village and the farm for home at once. And her first day there had been a long one, long enough to blot out the whole of her past life. She got into bed and fell asleep again at once, with the magic tunes of the gramophone still sounding in her ears, the gayest, funniest, loveliest music in the world.

Chapter Four

NONA went in to stay with Laura for little Billy's funeral, but she did not take the children. She said there was no call to make a fuss over the death of a child so young you hardly knew it had been in the world at all, and in the summer-time, too, when babies dropped like flies. "Besides," she said, "sorrow weighs too heavy on a child."

Gran'ma clucked. "I wouldn't take it on myself, Nona Lucas, to say how much of sorrow these children's fit to bear." And she made Kibby and Liliás go without desert the day Billy died and the day of the funeral. If he was only a baby, she said, it wasn't right for his own kin to pass over his dying as if he was a heathen. Nona admitted she was right, but she would not take the children. The truth was, one of her restless spells had come upon her and she meant to spend awhile in the village.

She was away ten days and the children did as they pleased. Nobody bothered about them as long as they showed up at meal-times and cleaned their plates. "Somethin's mighty apt to be wrong when a child don't eat," Gran'ma said. "When a child quits eatin', then's the time to worry."

All day Kibby and Liliás followed Jim and Bonnie about their work. They liked to be with the Negroes. Their laziness, their laughter, their inconsequential snatches of talk and song, their long easy silences, their animal indolence—dropping down in a moment like a dog or a cat in the sun—all made a rhythm that was natural to children.

They rode with Jim, sitting beside him on the rough plank that was laid across the wagon. They talked for a while,

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each one his own talk, not bothering to answer the others; and then their voices would cease and they would jolt along, content with the motion and the rhythmic creak of the wagon and the comforting heat of the sun. Sometimes Jim would sing, a sort of crooning without words or with any words at all, and they would all sway back and forth in time with the tune.

They went with Bonnie each day to hunt for eggs in the barn, and after supper to feed the pigs. In the warm, odorous twilight of the barn they searched out the eggs, in dark corners, in empty feed-boxes and stalls, and sometimes they found a stolen nest and called Bonnie to come to scare off the angry hen. Up in the loft they ran about, filling the basket quickly. At last Bonnie would set the full basket down and drop into the hay. "O Lawd!" she moaned, luxuriously. The children lay on their backs beside her. The hay was sweet-smelling and soft under them, and it pricked where it met their bare skin. The dust from it got down under their clothes and chafed them, but they did not mind. They lay staring up into the half-darkness under the roof, where the long pale beams of light slanted in through the crescent openings and made sloping paths of dusty gold.

After supper they walked in the still, colorless evening down the path beyond the garden to the pigpens. Bonnie walked ahead, swaying, balancing her heavy pails of slops. They could see all the movement of her body under the brief cotton dress that was all she wore. When it swung to her swaying walk her legs showed dark and glossy under it, but her feet and calves were dulled and grayed with dust. As they drew near the pens she began to call softly: "Pug. Pug. Pug." There was a stirring and grunting and then a crescendo of shrill squealing. They stood for a while withholding the swill, laughing at the hogs' agony of greed. At last Bonnie would lift one pail and then the other, flinging the slops down into the trough so they splashed and scat-

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tered the crowding pigs. Then the squealing stopped in a panicky retreat and began again on a new note, and finally, as they all found places at the trough, died away into soft, thick grunts and gurglings.

Byrd did not often play with the little girls, and Liliās was happiest when he was not there, but Kibby circled round him like a little cat, caressing and vindictive, courting his rough horseplay and his quick abusive anger. Liliās was afraid of him and he despised her. He hated her timid baby ways and her little pale face with its sorrowful frightened acquiescent look. Whenever he was with them he stayed close to her, drawn by the perverse attraction of his loathing, and pulled her hair and pinched her and shouldered her out of the path.

When the three children were with Jim and Bonnie, Byrd liked to torment the little girls with songs and dirty words he had picked up, whose meaning none of them understood except by instinct. Jim and Bonnie tried to keep stern, disapproving faces. "You watch yo'se'f now, you Byrd Lucas!" The little girls looked down, puzzled and shy, and Byrd pranced and shouted and leered at the young Negroes, whose gravity would all at once desert them. They would double up then with mirth, slapping themselves and capering: "Gawd, O Gawd A'mighty!" Kibby and Liliās, uneasy and bewildered, would cling tightly to each other and begin to cry.

No one thought to bring hot water up to the children after Nona went, and when she got home they had sores on their arms and legs from scratches and bites and dirt. She stood still in the front hall and looked them up and down: "Great day! I never saw such sights in all my life!"

She decided to take them to Tabb Springs to bathe their sore legs in the healing waters. Nona always looked for a chance to go early to the Springs, where there was sure to

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be a crowd—people she knew, and, better still, people she had never seen before.

“Let’s open up the cabin,” she said that night at the supper table. “It’s a little early in the year, but that don’t matter. We’ll all take us a week or two’s holiday now while things are kind of slack.”

Ivy said, laughing, that he had a good deal going on at the store this time of year, and Aunt Vi cried: “What’s come over you, Nona Lucas? Talkin’ like this with all the summer’s work comin’ on!”

Nona said: “Don’t anybody have to come that don’t want to. I’ll take the children and drive over tomorrow or next day and put up at the hotel.”

Pollard’s Hotel stood at one end of the Green. At the other was the open-air pavilion where there were dances week-nights and singing until ten on Sunday evenings. Some talented boarder played the old upright piano for the dancing, except on Saturday night, when Pollard got a three-piece orchestra from Melford and there was a real dance until twelve o’clock.

Along each side of the Green was a row of wooden shacks, set on stilts above the marshy ground. On the river side the cabins were built up on piles of rotting wood covered with green slime, and when the river was high the water came up under them and garbage and papers and refuse of all kinds washed against the piles and clung to them. After a while it floated away or was pushed off by long poles, but some of it stuck, so there was always a bad smell around the river cabins and the people on the mountain side said they would not change places for money. But folk lucky enough to own cabins on the river side laughed at that. They could dive from their back porches and tie up their canoes at their doors, and as for the smell, there was the same smell more or less all over Tabb Springs, and when you were used to it one side of the Green was the same as the other.

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The Green itself was a large grassy field with a natural path around it, formed by the trampled ground in front of the cabins where the children played. The grass was never cut and in a wet season it grew knee high and it was as much as anyone's life was worth to walk in it, with the mosquitoes and all kinds of stinging bugs. Even in the daytime and in dry weather the mosquitoes rose up in clouds when some one walked through the Green, and at night their humming drowned out all the other common country sounds. "

Every year two or three people got snake bite in the grass on the Green, and babies crawling out into it from the path were mosquito-bitten into fever. Children drowned by the half-dozen in the river, and along in the summer cases of typhoid sprang up here and there, so there was always an exodus of the nervous-minded before the season was over. But families came back year after year, and there were people anxious to take the place of any who were frightened away.

The Springs were famous throughout the state; the place had the name of being at once a family place and gay. The cabins were owned by people who brought their families there every summer; and the hotel was a great vacation place for young people, parties of young school-teachers and clerks, and it had a bad name. Every year the hotel and the two rows of cabins were crowded with holiday-makers from the farms and the small towns round about, drawn to the Springs by the deep urge of inland folk for water. In these farmers and in these clerks from small town stores, most of whom had never seen the sea, some inward necessity was satisfied by the waters of even this polluted, turgid river.

It was after sundown when Nona and the children drove up to the hotel. The girls had come out in bright voiles and organdies and walked with their arms around one another, laughing and talking with their shrill evening gaiety. It was too early yet for their beaux to join them, and the porch was packed with men—clerks hot and dapper in dark city clothes,

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farmers in shirt sleeves and suspenders, country boys with open-collared shirts and riding-breeches, gay young men from the near-by towns in blue coats and white trousers. When it was darker they would join the girls on the path around the Green, seeking out the one they wanted in the half-light alive with fireflies and gnats and whispering, and then they would drift in couples down to the pavilion and some one would sit down at the piano and start the dance.

A colored boy in a soiled white coat took their horse, and Nona grasped the children's arms and towed them firmly through the crowd of men.

Their room had two double beds and a bureau and one rocker. There was a washstand with a small pitcher of cold water, but no towels. Nona went on a raid down the hall and came back with half a dozen. She dealt them out one apiece and put the rest in the bureau drawer "against hard times."

Byrd had skipped out of the buggy when they arrived and disappeared. Nona said they would not wait for him. The little girls splashed their hands and faces and undressed modestly under their nightgowns while Nona sat in the rocker and looked out the window. When they were in bed she rolled her shirtwaist and chemise down over her corset and scrubbed her neck and arms. Then, sternly cautioning them to keep their eyes shut, she stripped and put on her nightgown and sat for a while soaking her feet in the basin. There was no water left for Byrd and probably there would be none brought in the morning. "Tomorrow," Nona said, "all of you have got to soak in the mud and then get in the river right up to your necks. That's a real bath for you. We'll have those sores off in no time, and the rest of the dirt besides."

Kibby and Liliast slept soundly, but Nona spent the night in the rocker with her head on a pillow on the window sill. At midnight Byrd came in and she looked at him, her lips pressed together, and motioned him fiercely to bed.

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In the morning they were wakened by a curious stamping and rumbling as of penned animals under their window. It was an hour before breakfast-time, but the men were already lined up in the hall and out on the porch and even down the porch steps to the Green, waiting to storm the dining-room.

"Hurry up and get dressed!" Nona ordered, her eyes snapping, eager at once for the contest she foresaw. "I don't reckon we stand much of a chance, though, hurry or no hurry, with all those wild hyenas."

She turned to Byrd sternly. "As for you, you villain, you start back home right after breakfast. Last night was enough for me! Not a word out of you! To tell the truth, I'm glad of an excuse to get shut of you, and of Trooper eating his head off in Pollard's stable."

The bottom of the stairway was just across from the door of the dining-room, so when they came down they found themselves well up in front of the crowd. Nona was in high spirits: "We'll manage to get us breakfast first, after all, just you wait and see!" And she pressed ahead, digging in with her elbows and coming down hard with her small high-heeled shoes. But when the door finally opened she was overwhelmed. The flood of hungry men broke over them and they were swept back, high up on the stairs for safety's sake, and they had to wait for second breakfast, after all.

Nona sailed into the dining-room when the second bell rang, and took one look at the long table with its cloth stained and littered with broken food. She swept the dirty silver and napkins that still lay at the places the waiter showed them to, off upon the floor. Then she told the colored boy sharply: "You send me Mr. Pollard and be quick about it! I'll be waiting in the hall."

Mr. Pollard came out into the hall from his private table with his napkin still in his vest. He was a tall paunchy man with dyed purplish hair and a false air of good nature. "Now,

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Mis' Lucas," he said, smiling and bowing, making nothing of his interrupted breakfast. "And what, ma'am, can I do for you?"

"I'd be ashamed of myself, Gus Pollard!" she squealed at him, dancing up and down in her effort to bring her eyes to a level with his, while he smiled and looked over her head. "I'd be ashamed to ask folks to leave their clean beds for your dirty ones and charge 'em good money besides! Those beds in my room, one of 'em was as flat as a board and just as thin, except where it was stuffed with rocks, and the other was a feather bed that closed up around you like the Egyptians in the Red Sea, and on a hot night, too! And as if that wasn't enough, they were full of bedbugs, besides, so that I spent the night in a chair with my head out the window! And then, to make it full measure and running over, we got trampled under your boarders' big feet and found worse than pig slops left for breakfast! Just take a look at that table, Gus Pollard, and tell me if your niggers in the kitchen sit down to food like that!"

"Well, ma'am," he said, falsely jovial, "first come first serve, you know. And as for the beds, if all folks left clean ones at home, mine wouldn't be dirty."

"Very well, Gus Pollard," Nona said. "You take your choice. You give me a good room with clean beds, and a decent breakfast, and draw a line through last night's bill, and things are all right between us. If not, I vow I won't waste a minute spreading it over the whole county how I had to get out of your hotel for bedbugs and wouldn't set foot in it again for money. As for last night's bill, you suit yourself about it, for no matter what you say, wild horses couldn't make me pay a penny of it."

"Now, Miss Nona," he urged, "you and me are business people. Why, you run a hotel yourself and everybody says you're the smartest woman in the county. You know that this ain't no way to do business."

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"I'm business woman enough not to give a snap for your foolishness," she answered, smartly, "and I guess you're business man enough not to want to get any woman down on you, let alone Nona Lucas."

Mr. Pollard capitulated, easing his defeat with gallantry: "Well, we all know how ladies are and that you can't expect no different from 'em. Well, Miss Nona, I'd count it a privilege to have you as a guest for last evening and to eat at my own private table for all your meals hereafter."

Nona was at once in a high good humor. She enjoyed nothing more than a good fracas, even when she was the loser. Now she had conquered and she made no attempt to hide her triumph. She hustled the children into the dining-room and over to the alcove where Mr. Pollard had his table, calling back over her shoulder: "You're a wise man, Gus Pollard! I'll do the same for you any time you come over my way—and show you how to keep a hotel clean and decent in spite of the boarders!"

Lilias had felt a premonition of happiness even on the train; through all her loneliness and bewilderment and fright she had even then begun to be happy. She had known surely that she would be driving up the hill with Edward Gay and seeing for the first time the colt and the red cows and the yellow flowers in the grass. She felt it more strongly every day at Nona's, and she thought she could never be happier anywhere; but Tabb Springs was paradise.

Through the long hot days she and Kibby played on the river. They waded and dabbled in the mud along the banks, and the older children took them out in canoes or towed them beyond the safe shallow water on their water-wings. They lived in their little draggled bathing-suits of scratchy blue cloth trimmed with white tape into which the blue had run. At night they slept soundly, too tired to feel the river grit in their knees and armpits, or the hot scale of sunburn on their necks, or the poisonous white welts made by the

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mosquitoes. Miraculously their sore legs healed in the scum of the river and they throve on the heat and filth. All through the long days the blazing aseptic sun poured into them its mysterious healing energy and drove the poisons out of them in sweat.

Kibby put on weight and lost her spoiled languid ways, and Liliás became a different child. She burned to a clear fruity brown, and the little short light tendrils of her straight dark hair were bleached and frizzled by the sun. Her thin body and her small sharp face filled and softened, and she was quicker and not so quiet. Callie, come out for the day to see her, cried: "Why, Nona, the child is very pretty!" She bent over and took Liliás's face in her hands, and the faint medicinal fragrance of cologne enveloped the little girl and she saw her aunt's face come very close and stared at an enlarged segment of the clear sallow skin, very clean and dry and fine. As she looked at Liliás, Callie's vague, luminous gaze slowly focused and grew sharp: "You know, Nona, I'd say she was an unusually pretty child; she may grow up to be quite a beauty. Wouldn't it be nice if Ralph could see her? I'm going to take a picture and send it up to Ralph. It would be only natural if he felt some interest in Bess's child."

"Yes," Nona agreed. "Ralph's as rich as cream, I hear, since he got out of the Navy. He ought to do something for her. In a way she's more his niece than Kibby, even, for she hasn't a father and he's the only man she's got to look to. Ivy will always watch out for Kibby—he's a fool over her—but Liliás hasn't anyone but Ralph. He ought to be made to see that."

"I wish he could see her," Callie said. "She's an appealing little thing, the kind a man would take to. I'm afraid she won't take a very good picture."

"All the men here made a big fuss over Liliás, more than Kibby, though she don't like it and keeps out of their way.

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But she's the sort men always like, little and shy and pretty and not too bright. Isn't it funny, how men want the very ones who'll be most trouble to them, the kind of girls they'll always have to do for?"

"Well," Callie said, "it would be a bad thing for this world if men didn't find it natural to do for women."

It was true that the men at the Springs tried to make a pet of Liliias. They wanted to hold her hand and put their arm around her; when she passed too close they reached out and caught her and pulled her to them. She was docile and polite, but she hated their touch, and she learned how to keep away from them. She stayed near the women; she liked women best. She liked to be with the big, clean, comfortable women in starched house dresses who stopped Nona for a gossip, and she liked the pretty girls with their high gay voices and their bright clothes. Everyone treated her kindly and spoke gently to her, and when she remembered to think of her, Nona showed her a quick, warm affection.

It was the first time Liliias had known either freedom or security. Here, after her cramped, terrified life in the hotel in Detroit, was the whole world to run about in and nothing to frighten her. For the first time she was rid of the intolerable pressure of an adult life lived too close to her own. Now she was in a child's world, separate and free, where grown people were only beneficent figures in the background of her days, where she felt no emotion but a simple pleasure in the sun's heat on her bare skin and the cool mud of the river bank on her bare feet, and a simple fear, easily recognized and evaded, of the deep water and of the bugs in the rotten wood and of the loud-mouthed, teasing men.

Bess had not been dead two months, and Liliias had forgotten her. Nona often said how queer it was that the child never spoke of the time before she came to them and never asked about her mother. Laying her clothes away, Nona ex-

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claimed over them: "Made by hand and embroidered all over, most of them! Bess, too, who never took the pains the other girls did with her needle! Why, she must have been downright crazy about that child!"

But these pretty clothes Bess had made for her, the small tendernesses and the daily care—all this Lillas took for granted and had forgotten. What she remembered when she allowed herself to think, were the terrifying visits to her bed at night; the wild, incomprehensible fits of gaiety and despair; the outbursts of affection that were followed by days of stony indifference, when her mother thought of nothing but her cards and sat all day by the window without speaking or giving her anything to eat. These things Lillas knew dimly as assaults upon her child's clear right to peace and security, and she remembered them all her life in her body, as though they had been cruel beatings. When she thought of this time she grew silent, she bent her head and looked away and shivered. Then she made haste to forget again. She allowed herself only one memory of her mother—the brilliant, half-imagined memory of Bess dressed to go out to dinner, standing, young and laughing and beautiful, under the harsh gas light, dressed in flaming red. On this picture she forced herself to dwell until her mind would fly back to it at any mention of her mother or of her former life.

Nona said, "I believe you kind of like it here with us, Lillas."

"I like it best of anywhere in the world," Lillas said, gravely.

"Well," Nona said, "I think it's pretty nice, myself. I know lots of people who think they'd like to get away if they could. Your mother, now, she was one who was always hankering to get away. She and Matty. All the Flood girls were kind of restless and craving. Now I don't say that if I had no ties—if I was a widow, say, with plenty of money—

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I wouldn't like to travel. I'd spend some time in one place or another I can think of. I'd like a trip up to Baltimore or to Washington again where we went on our honeymoon, or to Richmond every so often. And I'd like to see New York, and Florida you hear so much about nowadays. But I'd come back home. I believe in making your way wherever your lines are. There's something real satisfying in getting the kind of life you want out of the things and the people you were born to."

Chapter Five

NONA kept the children at the Springs over the Fourth of July, when everyone from the farm, even Gran'pa, came over to spend the day, and drove them home to the village the day after. Kibby saw her father on the street in front of the drug store with some other men, and she jumped out of the buggy to join him. Nona and Liliias drove on to the Floods' house at the end of the village street.

They walked up the short front path. In the side yard in a long chair under the walnut tree Matty Flood was asleep. She wore a white dress, short, as though she were still a young girl, and her long black hair was tied back with a narrow piece of red ribbon which might have come off a Christmas present or a candy box. She had no book or sewing beside her, but a little silver bell was on the grass, which she would ring if she were bored or wakeful. Now she slept, as idly and as briefly as she might have nibbled at a piece of candy or glanced at a book. Nona looked at her. "I vow it's a shame," she said. "Lying around all day only half alive, and she's not a day older than I am." Liliias was astonished to hear this, for with her gay hair ribbon and her white-stockinged legs, she had thought Matty was a little girl.

Nona stood in the open door and called, "Hoo-hoo!" Mrs. Flood came out, plump and spry and curiously remote, with her air of not quite knowing who they were or what they had come for. She smiled and offered them each her little soft, limp hand. "How do, daughter! How do, daughter! Come in. Callie's upstairs, laying down."

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They went out of the fierce July heat into the house, which was very dim and cool. Callie came running down the stairs, settling her waist and tidying her hair, her lips moving rapidly with words they were too far away to hear.

"Well! You've taken your time to bring the child back, I must say! But I don't know what we'd have done with her here! We've had our hands full in this house, I can tell you!" She glanced significantly toward the door, nodding in the direction of the yard where Matty lay asleep.

Nona clucked. "Now don't tell me Matty's bad again!"

Callie said: "Well, the baby's being here so sick, and the funeral and all that—it was too much for her. She kind of went to pieces afterwards."

Mrs. Flood said, with a detached and indulgent irony: "Now, Nona, you ought to know by this time that Matty's bound to have a spell after something else has had the center of the stage."

Matty tinkled her little bell; the unfamiliar steps on the walk and the voices in the hall must have wakened her. Callie hurried out, calling over her shoulder: "Lilias has the little room on the hall, Bess's old room. You take her on up, Nona; she'll feel less strange with you."

Nona showed her her room and left her. "I've got to run along now. I'm never in town long enough to call my time my own—there's always a hundred and one things to do, and half of 'em never get done, with all my hurrying. You take a rest, like a good child—you must be tired after that long drive—and I'll see you at supper-time."

Lilias sat on the window-seat and looked out at the side yard with its tall uncut grass sprinkled with flowering weeds. The big walnut tree grew across from her window and shut out the sun. The dark furniture and woodwork and the polished floor, shimmered over with the green light that came through the leaves, gave the little room a cool, shady look, like a clearing in the woods. Lilias thought of her moss house

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in the woods behind the orchard. After a little Callie brought her a glass of milk and a plate of small rich cakes, and she sat eating them and looking out. She was cool and rested now, tranquilly content.

Suddenly the door opened and she looked around and saw Laura Gay.

Laura had always been tall and large-boned, and she had grown big, as thin women sometimes do, with a deep bosom and great wide hips belying the haggardness of her face. She was the darkest of the sisters, with close-banded jet-black hair, and so thin that her bones, her elbows and breast bone and the little knob at the back of her neck, had made dark spots like bruises on the brown of her skin. She had dark smiling eyes and a wide mouth with big white teeth. Today she wore a white cotton dress sprigged all over with a small crimson flower that set off the rich bronze of her bare arms and throat. She had been working in the garden and had on a pair of old loose gloves. Her face was moist and flushed and there was a smear of dirt on one cheek where she had pushed back a loose strand of hair. Her body gave off the steamy smell of soil and hot clean flesh. She was like a part of the great, warm, colorful earth itself, and Liliás, seeing her suddenly, thought she was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Laura came in swiftly and took Liliás in her arms. She sat down and, holding her in her lap, she rocked her back and forth and crooned over her: "Here's my baby been here 'most two whole months and her aunt Laura not set eyes on her till this minute! What's Nona been thinking about, you suppose, keeping this lamb to herself all this long time? You are going to stay right close to Aunt Laura from now on, my honey. We're all of us going to love this baby, but Laura most of all because babies just naturally belong to her. This old house is mighty big and lonesome for such a little girl. Don't ever forget that I'm just down the road

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and the latch is always out and Kibby's waiting to play. You come on down to Aunt Laura's, honey, whenever these old folks seem like poor company for you—to Laura who ought to have had you, anyway, by rights!"

Lilias was only six years old, but since Clyde left them no one had treated her like a baby. No one had fondled her and talked to her like this. In her wild, fitful way Bess had loved her dearly, and Nona was always affectionate and kind; but this was Lilias's first taste, since the old days with her father, of that tenderness, at once passionate and impersonal, which comforts the body physically like heat. Laura gave out this warmth to every young living thing, so that she had been able to bear children and lose them without suffering too much. Her heart was always too full to break. There were always young things to mother and to love, and her big, tired, generous body was never empty of a child for long.

After she went downstairs the room seemed empty and bleak, like a hearth with the fire gone out of it. The branches of the big walnut tree cut off all the sunlight now, so that it grew darker and darker with a false twilight, while outside it was still late bright afternoon.

Lilias made haste to change her dress and go down to the others. She splashed her face and hands with cold water, wetting her underclothes in her haste; but she did not change them, because she was afraid to undress all the way in this dark room. In spite of her trembling hurry she hung her dress and petticoat carefully over a chair and put her shoes side by side underneath, with her socks folded smoothly and laid over them. It had come into her mind one day to do this, and now she could not stop. When things were not matched they looked lonely, and somehow they made her afraid. It grew darker in the room and she trembled with desire for the safe daylight and the sound of voices, but before she went down she looked around the room and ar-

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ranged everything possible in pairs. She had forgotten Bess and the lonely frightened days in their hotel rooms, filled with queer, vague thoughts and fears. All that was left of that time was a shadow, a dim menace she felt in the darkness, sudden inexplicable terrors when she was alone, with which she compounded in secret ways of her own. This pairing was one of them. When everything in the room except the furniture was paired with its mate, and the rug by the bed pulled straight and the chairs in a row against the wall, she fled through the door and down the stairs to safety and light.

At the supper table Liliat sat next to Callie, who helped her to preserves and pickle and cocoa and cut up her cold meat. Liliat sat by her quietly, looking up politely to say thank you and to answer when she was spoken to, knowing with the sure instinct of the helpless and dependent that it was to Aunt Callie she must look for her life. But Laura sat across the table and she was always conscious of her. For what seemed like a long time the thought of Nona had been her protection and the foundation of her existence. When they were in company and Nona spoke, or when some one asked Liliat herself a question, it was to Nona that her eyes always went, for assurance, for approval, for aid. But now Nona had become one of the company, had gone into the background with Mamma, with Aunt Matty, with Dell who brought in the food from the kitchen and handed it around. Laura filled all her mind.

Suddenly she was mastered by an impulse that came from the secret depths of her being, mysterious and irresistible. Glancing cautiously about, she began to change the position of everything at her place: she moved her knife and fork and spoon, the little pitcher that held her cocoa, the old salt-boat and pepper-mill that stood before her on the tablecloth. She moved them all so that, according to the picture she

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made of them in her mind, they pointed their heads straight toward Laura. When she had finished doing this, Liliás ate with her eyes on her plate, only daring to peep up now and then; and when she helped herself to sugar she was careful to replace the spoon so that its handle pointed to Laura, like the needle of a compass toward its north.

PART FIVE

LAURA

Chapter One

LAURA finished the meal quickly. She was alone in the dining-room, for the twins had eaten and had run out to play, and Kibby was with Liliias, and Edward had his dinner at the hotel. Sometimes he had his supper there, as well. Nobody in the village had ever heard of such a thing as a man buying his meals when he had a home to go to; and certainly it took a great deal of money, actual cash of which there was never much. But Edward said he could not eat at the table with the children.

Laura thought, with her habitual irritated tolerance, the same annoyed and amused indulgence she felt for her children when they were difficult, that Edward was very hard to please. He had wanted children, for his idea of himself necessitated his being the head of a family, and Laura knew that he had blamed her bitterly each time one of theirs had died. He had wanted sons to carry on the name; he had never troubled to conceal his indifference to Kibby; and yet he could not be alone with the boys two minutes without falling into a rage and thrashing them. Laura had often winced to see the welts on their little bodies, although she knew that it was a man's right to bring up his sons as he pleased. It was her nature to be indulgent, and especially she made allowances for Edward. She even understood dimly what was wrong with him. His life had never followed the picture he made of it. He had a certain picture of himself in his mind: the owner of Gays Park, the last of a fine old family, a sort of squire to the faithful village. Perhaps a hundred years ago the Gays had lived as he imagined himself living,

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certainly not since; but he still saw himself the heir to their leisured magnificence. And he was angered anew every time he was forced to open his eyes to his house shabby and run-down, to Clo serving him with her slatternly ways, and to Laura faded and shabby, and to his wild, undisciplined children. Laura knew that in his heart he felt that they had all betrayed him. He closed his mind to as much of his life as he could, and ran away from the rest. Laura was often out of patience with him, at her wit's end to find an answer to his riddle and sense to his contrariness, but at bottom she knew how it was with him and could not bring herself to judge him hardly.

Laura had eaten everything on her own plate and now she reached for a scrap or two the children had left. She was a big, healthy woman and she was always hungry. Sometimes she was quite faint with hunger and went back to the pantry and looked into boxes and along empty shelves, and finally broke off pieces of dry bread and ate them standing. The children were all three Gays, small-boned and blond and wiry, and they never seemed to care about their food, but Laura often went unbearably hungry in her own house. She wondered why there was never anything to eat. Of course Clo cleaned her out when she went home at night, but there should have been more than enough to allow for Clo's toting. At home, after Dell left in the evenings, there were always dishes of broken food—the end of a ham, the carcass of a chicken, a dozen cold biscuits in the bread-box, ten times more than she could carry away. Laura could never understand why her housekeeping was so poor and skimpy compared with Mamma's and Callie's, when there was no more money at home. She missed the good living she had been brought up to, the rich, dirty, careless abundance, where the roaches ran about the laden shelves and the fruit flies hung over preserves in open saucers and mold formed over forgotten dishes of broken food. At home Mamma and the

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girls ate all day long in every room in the house, there were cake crumbs down behind the chairs and sofa, and a plate of fudge or crackers and jam or a dish of pickles left on a bureau or table. Laura brooded on these things with a morbid craving. In the middle of the day she would pick up and go over to her mother's; she always looked for a chance to spend a few days at home, but her own pantry remained bare and empty.

She sometimes wondered whether, if she had been able to feed Edward as Mamma and Callie would have done, he would have stayed more at home. She would have liked to think that it was a hunger like her own that drove him out, but she knew very well that he noticed food no more than the children. It was another hunger that she had never been able to satisfy; for all her love, she had not been able to feed his need for power, for applause, and for importance.

Today, as Laura ate the scraps on the children's plates, she asked herself again why, when she was mistress of the house, she never had enough to eat. Of course Clo was not a born cook like their Dell, and she had not Dell's time to give to cooking. Except for her hasty, scamped cleaning, Dell was in the kitchen all day long, and Clo had all the work of the house and the washing and the children to look after. Time after time, when the children were ailing or there was a new baby, Laura kept her at the house and she slept on an old cot in the nursery and was up half the night. Laura thought: "A colored woman with Clo's work to do is always a slut. Cook or laundress, or nurse, they can't do but the one thing well." Besides, Clo was a wizened, lazy old thing with no stomach to her, who preferred trailing around after the children to doing a real day's work in the kitchen. "Well," Laura thought, "I'd rather eat dry bread the balance of my life than have to have the children on my hands all day long."

Nevertheless, she knew that Clo could do better if she

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would; she had often come on her stirring something in a pan for herself that had a fine flavory smell. The truth was that she herself had not the spirit to drive her, and Clo would not take the trouble. No nigger would trouble herself to do her best for a lone woman, far less one whose husband neglected her. Colored people are quick to sense a situation and they waste no pity on the under dog; to see anyone helpless or dependent or badly treated rouses all the cruelty in their easy natures. Laura thought of how pert and careless Dell had been when there was something to be done for Grandmamma and Aunt Sophie; she thought: "Because Edward eats his dinner at the hotel and goes out with other women, to Clo I'm no better than a poor relation, here on sufferance." She could not doubt Clo's real devotion, but she knew that it would not be possible for her to resist showing her contempt.

Laura leaned her elbows on the table and thought, bitterly: "Even the cook in my kitchen has no use for me on account of Edward's doings." But her bitterness was only momentary; she could not take him seriously enough to be really angry for long. Why, she asked herself, with an indignation that was immediately tempered by pity and amusement, must he always make such a figure of himself? Eating at the hotel, at the table with the station agent and the clerks from Lucas's and Peach's stable hands and the white-faced, mincing school-teacher! Hanging around Lucas's store when he should have been in his office, and going back at night to drink there with the common trash! Going around to the rough country dances and making talk with the country girls! Laura knew in her heart that the real reason he did these things was neither indifference nor depravity; it was because with these people he felt himself a fine gentleman. However much they mocked and gossiped and deplored, Edward always impressed the common people. That was at least half the reason why he got into scrapes with the ordinary farm girls, most of them

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as tired and draggled and badly dressed, Laura thought, contemptuously, as herself. She pitied and despised Edward because he had so desperate a need for their adulation. She thought: "Edward just can't help himself. Every so often he's got to feel big or he'd die!"

Now it was the new high-school teacher. She had come from somewhere in the North, an ordinary little Yankee girl with a slick veneer of education, the very sort to be taken in by Edward. Would he never grow too old for such nonsense? But Edward, with his English riding-breeches and his gadding to dances and his trips back to the University, where he drank too much and made gifts he could not afford to his fraternity, would never be old to himself. Laura was forty, six years younger than he, and she knew herself for an old woman.

The only thing she could not forgive Edward was Matty. She could not believe he cared for Matty, but there had been gossip about them from the first, and she felt it was hard that people should be able to talk about her husband and her own sister. Edward stopped by to see Matty two or three times a week, sat beside her as she lay on the sofa, drank a glass of her medicine with her, and left in a few minutes. There was no more to it than that, just enough to keep people talking. And why did he do it except to devil them all, Laura and Matty herself, and Callie and Mamma? He teased Mamma and disliked Callie; he was capable of keeping up his little comedy simply to torment them. But there was more to it, Laura felt, than this characteristic malice. Even more than the silly little country girls, Matty was dazzled by him: his faults and weaknesses, his laziness and debts and bad manners, his dissipations and eccentricities, all combined to excite her imagination. Laura thought, ruefully: "Perhaps he would have been better off with her. Matty at least would never have seen through him!" Still, she could not bring herself to forgive them completely.

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There was a rankling soreness in her thoughts of Matty. She thought, with an impatience and irritation not natural to her: "Why on earth don't she marry Hugh Tidball and be thankful, like anybody else would in her place!"

These thoughts touched Laura and filled her with a baffled sense of insult and injustice, but they were too foreign to her mind to linger there or even to be phrased. She made a little clucking sound of dismissal and got up from the table. "When it comes to a married man," she thought, "I'd a good sight rather be the wife than the sweetheart."

She gathered up the plates and carried them out to the kitchen, where Clo was eating her dinner at a table piled with breakfast dishes and over-run with ants. Where some milk had been spilled there was a great black clot of them on the floor. Laura said: "You can leave all the dishes until tonight, Clo. I want you to keep an eye on the children while I'm at Miss Nona's. I'll be there for supper, so there won't be any for you to get—the children can have bread and butter here with you. After they're in bed, you can finish up the whole batch of dishes at one time."

Clo said: "I figured on gettin' through my ironin' today."

"Well, if you can't do both, the ironing must wait. I can't leave the twins to run wild all afternoon and evening."

Clo grunted: "Kibby ought to stay home once in a while and do her share of lookin' after babies, so's folks could get through their work."

"She ought to," Laura said, laughing, "but you know good and well you'd be at me like a wild cat if I stood in the way of her doing what she wanted!"

When she went back through the dining-room, Laura took out an old linen cloth from the sideboard and wiped the table carefully. She did not care for old furniture and knew nothing of its value. To her taste the veneered and upholstered pieces that had been brought up from the boarding-house in Norfolk and purchased from time to time by

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Mamma to replace the junk she found at home, were far handsomer than the rickety stuff at Gays Park. But by sharing the house with them for years there were some pieces she had come irrationally to love. These she rubbed and dusted herself, and everything else, fine things and trash alike, she left to Clo.

While she polished the table, Liliás ran in to say that Mr. Tom Weems had sent his carriage and Callie and Matty were waiting for her. Laura sent Liliás upstairs for her hat and the work-bag she kept for Red Cross meetings, and then back again for her handkerchief, and out into the kitchen for a glass of water. Sitting on one of the stiff slim Sheraton chairs, heavy and indolent, she watched Liliás's long thin black legs and dark swinging plaits and thought that sometimes she seemed more her own child than Kibby. When Laura was ready at last, they set out down the short stretch of dusty road under her old parasol of red and white figured silk.

Callie was in front of the house, busy putting rugs and pillows onto the back seat of the carriage, and in a moment Matty came slowly down the steps and down the walk, leaning on Kibby's shoulder. Laura realized that they had been together a great deal lately and that she did not like it.

The war had been a wonderful thing for Matty. It had done her so much good that everyone said she was like a different person nowadays. Hugh Tidball said, dryly: "Well, if the men only hold out, I think we can about count on the war to work a cure."

Somewhere Matty had got hold of a list of soldiers who had no one to take an interest in them, and she wrote to them and sent them boxes. She made up packages of chocolate and cigarettes and magazines for her boys, as she called them, and she persuaded Kibby and Liliás and Hannah Peach and Fanny Bissell to help her collect things for her boxes and to write little cheering notes to accompany them. The girls were

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as passionately interested in this war work now as Matty was herself. Laura had considered it patiently, without haste or fret, but she could not bring herself to approve it. Not many people could withstand Matty's enthusiasm, especially when she said, with a pretty fervor in her face and voice: "I don't think anyone can exaggerate the wonderful effect it has on a man to know that somewhere some woman is thinking of him, *personally*." With her thin face and great dark eyes and her thin hands tightly clasped, she looked very spiritual, and it was obvious that the notes the girls wrote and received were necessary and important. Still, Laura did not know. Matty said she read all the letters, and no one, she said, who read them could doubt the good these "pure young spirits" did. Some of her boys, she said, were young and lost and lonely, and others had been hardened by misfortune and lack of love, but to all of them these letters and gifts were giving back their faith in the goodness of the world and the loving hearts of women. But, Laura wondered, had Matty really read all that raft of mail that came for Kibby? And even if Kibby did show her the letters—she had never, Laura thought, offered to show them to her mother—she was still dubious. Matty herself had a hatbox full of letters under her bed, and she would take them out and read them over when she could not sleep and when the pains in her head and heart threatened her. Laura had seen her reading them and smiling to herself, folding them carefully and tying them into little bundles; you could not tell her there was no nonsense about them! And of the photographs that covered the walls of Matty's room, which Callie had stinted herself to have neatly framed, there were many who looked definitely hardened—whether by misfortune or lack of love, Laura could not say. Privately she called them cut-throats and rascals. She often looked at them, walking about Matty's room with her hands clasped before her and a little frown on her

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handsome good-tempered face, wondering which were the ones who wrote to Kibby. She simply did not dare to ask.

Riding in front with Callie, listening to the three girls, as she called them, laughing and chattering on the seat behind, Laura went over the matter in her mind; "all this mess" she named it to herself. Kibby had always been flighty and she felt that this was adding to it. She did not think it was a good thing for Kibby to be with Matty so much of the time. Laura did not admit to herself that she held Matty's old foolishness against her, or that she disliked her a little on account of Edward. She did not put her worry into words even to herself, and she never tried to find out from Matty or Kibby if there was anything "going on," as she put it, again purposely vague in her definition. She had been tempted to look for the letters and read them, but again she did not dare. Laura always felt instinctively that nothing really existed until it was discovered, just as she never called in the doctor without feeling afterwards that whatever trouble he found dated from his visit.

"I must speak to Matty about all this writing and tell her I don't like it," Laura thought as they trundled down the road and Matty and the children giggled together in the back seat. "I'll drop her a hint that I have my own notion of the way things are going, and I'll do it this very afternoon."

Then they reached Nona's, where Laura always loved to go, where everything was so neat and flourishing: so much fresh paint and bright green grass and good food; and Laura saw the women on the porch, talking and rising now to welcome them, and her natural indolence and good nature overcame her resolution. No, not today. It would only upset Matty and make Callie angry and spoil everything. As likely as not Kibby would hear of it and go off into one of her tantrums. "Oh, I guess there's nothing much to it, after

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all," she thought. "There's no use stirring up trouble, anyway."

Kibby and Liliás got out to open the gate into the short lane, and went off together toward the barn. Callie said: "It seems to me they're plenty old enough to come in and do their share of the bandages." But Laura thought it was too pretty a day to keep young things indoors, and Matty cried: "Oh, for goodness' sakes, Callie, let them have their fun! I bet that good-for-nothing Byrd is out there somewhere, looking for them."

Nona's porch was full of women who had just arrived, stopping to talk for a minute, and her parlor and dining-room were filled with others already at their work. Callie and Matty and Laura went straight back to the dining-room, where they were cutting and folding dressings on the cleared table. Miss Shaver, the high-school teacher, sat at the head of the table, folding neatly and quickly. She was a slender girl, very pale, with lacquered black hair in a braid around her small head and a white dress on, and she sat straight and still in her chair. When Laura came in she gave her a quick look, so that her nose-glasses caught the light and glittered, and then she bent her head again to her work. Everyone watched to see what Laura would do, but she was unconscious of their scrutiny. She said, "Howdy do!" smiling on them all, and sat down in her usual place. At no time during the long afternoon could their sharp eyes see that she made any difference between Miss Shaver and the other women.

Kibby and Liliás walked on past the barn into the orchard with their arms about each other. They were fourteen and fifteen, but Liliás was still like a little girl and Kibby was almost a young lady. She had cut her hair so there was no telling whether it was up or down, the soft light bob swung prettily when she turned her head, and her figure, in spite of her thinness, was full and supple. As they walked Liliás

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went without looking, careless and lazy, wherever Kibby's arm urged her, and Kibby's eyes darted from side to side, watching out incessantly for Byrd Lucas.

Last week Byrd had come back from his first year at V. M. I., looking to their eyes like a grown-up man. He was a strapping boy, burnt nigger brown from eighteen summers in the sun, and in all his ordinary clothes he had a heavy country look. But his cadet's uniform hid his bulging muscles and thick shoulders, and showed off his flat back and narrow flanks. He looked very dashing when they met him at the train in Melford, with his cap on one side and his cape thrown over his arm and his uniform as smooth and tight as if he had been poured into it. In his bathing-suit at the Springs, or working out in the fields with Jim stripped down to his undershirt, he was an even finer sight. Seen like this, half-naked, his body showed a rich even brown over chest and shoulders, the awkward muscles moved under the padded flesh with an easy ripple, and in spite of his thickset frame he was as hard and spare and limber as the Negro.

It was the summer of nineteen-eighteen, and no one knew then how much longer the war might go on. V. M. I. was the next thing to the Army, and his being there gave Byrd an almost military status in all their eyes. Besides, he said, next year he had no intention of wasting his time at school. When summer was over—for he never thought of giving up the good hot weather and the sun he loved and the warm sweet easy nights of summer-time—in the fall, then, he would go over to Melford and enlist; for who cared what they did with themselves in winter, and he surely did not want to miss the war altogether.

He said grinning, "I don't set myself up to be a hero. There's nothing that looks good to me in all this killing and carrying on. But I guess the worst of it must be over by now, and I'd like my share of the fun afterwards. I'd like to do a little neat strafeing in Germany. I always did think

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that the girls there would be better pickin's than these skinny French chickens, all black hair and big eyes and collar bones. Like Liliás here." And when he said this he caught hold of Liliás and pulled her over and squeezed her considerably. "Nope," he said, and laughed and gave her a little push. "No pickin's there."

He teased Kibby and Liliás whenever they were around him. He rather liked Kibby, but he still felt a mysterious irritation with Liliás's thinness and shyness and childish acquiescence. "Slow!" he said. "Dumb! If you ask me, she's not real bright; hookworm or something. Now Miss Kibby's another matter." However, he had no time to spare for little girls.

Today Kibby and Liliás went up through the orchard and over the little hill to where they saw Byrd and Jim in the back pasture. Girl, Trouper's partner, was there, and a strange horse, a big handsome black. His eyes were bandaged and the young men were trotting him up and down the field. They ran alongside, holding him near the bit, and now and then when he went too fast they hollered out and sawed on his mouth. Girl stood, quivering and still, in a far corner of the field.

Liliás and Kibby sat on the fence and watched. Jim saw them and jerked his head over his shoulder, and Byrd looked round and they both laughed. Their loud laughter and the strange scene in the hot bright sunshine coming after the silence and the cool emptiness of their walk through the trees made the girls feel shy and frightened. Liliás would have gone back, but Kibby held her hand tightly, and they sat on the fence, giggling nervously, their eyes round and bright.

The big horse grew restless and reared and the men had a hard time quieting him. They hung at his head, calling out to each other and laughing, and Girl quivered silently in her corner, and Kibby and Liliás, sitting on the fence, looked away from each other and giggled.

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When the horse was quieter, Byrd left him and came over to the girls. He leaned on the fence and stared at them. Without speaking he reached up and picked off a leaf and chewed it, staring. Then he laughed and waved his hand. "You two crazy kids get along home."

There was a crackling behind them and Aunt Vi came out from the trees with her apron full of early peaches. She had seen them from the orchard below and come round through the woods. Her eyes were sharp and her face very red. "I declare I'm ashamed to own any of you!" she cried. "And as for you, Byrd Lucas, I'd like to tan your sinful hide!" She reached over and slapped him and some of the peaches in her apron fell out and rolled on the ground. Byrd got one through the fence and went off laughing, biting into it and rubbing his cheek. Jim in the middle of the field doubled up and squawked with laughter. Aunt Vi lifted her arm at him threateningly, and shooed the girls toward home.

Nona had them stay to supper, Callie and Matty and Laura and the children. Kibby hung about Byrd all evening, and when Laura called to her she paid no attention. Callie clicked her tongue and the others laughed. Byrd lay in the hammock and flapped his hand. "O Lordy Lord! Flies in summertime!"

After that Byrd came over to the village sometimes to see Kibby. Nobody but Liliias knew about these visits, and Kibby did not tell even her; but when she went down the street in the late afternoon and saw Byrd Lucas outside his father's store, in his good clothes, grinning to himself and looking a little foolish, she knew in her bones that he had come over to see Kibby.

It was much later on that Clo found out and told Laura what was going on. Laura had not been well and Clo was staying in the house that summer. She had a room on the third floor with Kibby, and in the hot weather she had just

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a curtain across her door, and not much could happen that she did not know. One evening when Kibby slipped in late, Clo came into her room and took hold of her without a word and gave her a good sound whipping. Kibby was afraid to cry out, and afterwards she begged Clo not to tell. Clo would not promise, and the next morning she went down to speak to Laura, and Kibby was scared and told them everything.

That was a dreadful time. Edward stamped around in a black rage, and as Clo dared him to lay his hand on Kibby, he took it out of the twins' hide every day. Laura and Callie whispered together in corners, trying to keep it from Matty and Mamma, going over and over the mystery of how such a thing could have happened in the family, and who on earth Kibby took after with such goings-on; and they cried a little, holding their handkerchiefs to their lips.

Nona came over and chattered shrilly, enraging them by going off into sudden inexplicable fits of laughter. "Bless my soul!" she cried. "And all the time I thought it was that fat Hannah down at Peach's!" Once she made Byrd come over with her, and he sat in the parlor with them and took their angry storm of tears and questions, red and good-natured and sheepish.

"Ain't you ashamed of yourself, Byrd Lucas?" Nona shrilled. "Your own sweet, innocent little cousin! I vow I don't see how you came to do it!"

"I ain't ashamed," Byrd said, stolidly. "She was just asking for it all the time. All she wanted was for me to take her to the dances and call her Christine instead of Kibby. I'd think you would all be glad it was in the family."

Nona squealed and prodded him with her little tough fingers. "Go 'long with you, you shameless limb of Satan! What on earth am I going to do with such a fellow! If he's not the very spittin' image of his father!"

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Callie said, grimly: "Their skins ought to be flayed right off of both of them, and would be, too, if I had my way!"

"Well," Nona said, "Ivy is plain foolish over Kibby. He told me to say he'd like nothing better than to have her in the family, and that any way it goes, he'll do something handsome for her."

"The insolence!" Callie gasped.

Even Laura was indignant, in spite of her immediate perception of the fact that Ivy could be very useful if he chose, and her maternal determination to make the best of this bad business for her daughter.

Now Matty began to grow sick and restless, as she always did when she was not the center of attention, and Hugh Tidball was called in again to give her injections for her headaches. "Now just let Matty top it all by choosing this time to go off!" Callie groaned.

Only Mamma moved serenely through the commotion, seeming to notice nothing out of the way. She dismissed the whole affair by refusing to know about it, to see that anything was wrong, to question Callie and Laura about their red eyes and damp handkerchiefs. Her aloofness from the wretched business made her company a refuge for them all. The girls gathered in her room again with their sewing, and come in in the evenings to sit with her while she played *solitaire*. Liliás, who was ashamed and miserable without knowing exactly why she should be, kept as close to her as she could.

After all the worry and fuss, nothing happened. Byrd enlisted sooner than he had intended and was sent to the officers' training camp at Fort Myer. When they could be certain that everything was all right, Kibby went over to stay with Edward's relatives in Melford. Ivy had acted handsomely, as he had said he would, and she had pretty new clothes and money in the bank when she should decide to take a husband. It was done so quietly, Ivy keeping in the background and

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Nona controlling her inexplicable merriment, that it was soon possible to believe that Ivy's generosity was due simply to his partiality for Kibby. In a very short while everything blew over. There had been a great fuss made over separating Byrd and Kibby, but neither of them showed the least desire to see each other again. Kibby spent the winter in Melford with some of Edward's cousins, and came back in the spring a grown-up young lady, sixteen years old and engaged to be married.

Edward Gay's relatives were old people whose children had long ago left home, and they took a fancy to Kibby. When Dr. Porter began to call on her and single her out at dances, they wrote to Laura and pressed her to let Kibby stay on. Dr. Porter was thirty-eight, a settled well-to-do man, a fine catch for any girl. Kibby herself found her suitor rather dull, but she was proud of him, especially in his uniform. He was a major in the Medical Corps, just back from France, and that added to his glamour. Kibby regretted vaguely that he was only a doctor and not a real soldier, but it was a small objection.

Chloe was jubilant. "My chile know how to look out for herse'f, let 'em say what they pleases! Ain't you all glad now you didn't marry her off quick to that po' white Lucas boy—if he is Miss Nona's son!" To her own friends she said, chuckling: "I've heerd of folks catchin' a baby that-a-ways, but I never befo' heerd tell of a fine grown man, rich as cream, comin' from Kibby's kind of going-on!"

Laura was deeply content. A good marriage was what she had always wished for Kibby, and in spite of everything it was what she had. A better one than she had ever dreamed of. In retrospect the whole affair justified the basic philosophy of her life. She had been foolish to be upset by that childish scrape with Byrd Lucas. She had always known in her heart that if you just leave things alone they come out right in the end.

Chapter Two

LAURA sat in the large back bedroom at Gays Park which was called the children's room, and which was always the bedroom of the youngest child. Whenever there was a new baby it slept here, where it could cry without disturbing Edward, and where, when it was sick, hot water could be brought up the back stairs just outside the door and Clo could come and go easily from the kitchen.

The old crib, taken apart and wrapped in newspaper, stood in the closet with all the other odds and ends of children's trash—nursing bottles; a baby's tin chamber rusted through; broken toys; coats and sweaters and overshoes that had been outgrown. Up on the dusty shelf was the camphorated oil Laura rubbed on their chests in winter, and the enema and the castor oil and bottles of cough syrup and paregoric. These last had been there a long while untouched, for the two babies born after the twins had not lived long enough to teeth, and Laura's last pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage. Hugh Tidball told her then that she would have no more children, and her heart ached and her mind was at peace. In the three years that followed she became certain that he was right and that she would never bear another child, but she could not bring herself to throw her baby things away. In the highboy against the wall in the children's room she still kept the little dresses and coats, and flannel things packed away in moth-balls.

The highboy was a fine old piece, the only handsome thing in the room. Years ago when Mamma was cleaning house she had sold it to Ivy Lucas for two dollars, along with other

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things in the attic, provided he would come and cart them away. Laura and Edward were there when Ivy drove up with a wagon and two Negroes to carry out the furniture. Laura could see the scene as though it were yesterday. On late afternoons in the summer she and Edward, Hugh Tidball and his sister Maude, Callie and Mr. Tom Weems, sometimes played croquet in the big side yard. That day young Marshall Weems, Mr. Tom Weems' son who had been killed in the war—Laura always thought it strange that a man like Mr. Tom Weems, who could court and outlast three wives, had had only one child—Marshall brought over tennis balls and rackets and tried to teach Kibby and Lillas to serve. Callie, her croquet game ruined for the afternoon, called out incessantly in a high, distracted voice: "Not in the berry bushes, children! Marshall! Marshall! Not in my flower-beds!" Laura, thinking of it, could see and hear it all so plainly; it seemed to her that they did not have such good times nowadays.

When Ivy drove up and Edward saw the highboy going with all the other truck, he could not restrain himself. "Why, damn it all!" he cried, "it's nothing more nor less than robbery! And from a half-witted old lady, in broad daylight, in front of the whole town!"

"It was the old lady's bargain, not mine," Ivy Lucas told him. "She was glad enough to get this junk hauled off free, not to say two dollars besides."

In the end he sold the highboy back to Edward for the two dollars he had paid for the lot. Edward and Mr. Tom Weems and Hugh and Marshall got it down the road to Gays Park, for Ivy wouldn't move it an inch for the price, and up the stairs, all laughing and cursing and sweating and covered with dust. They dumped it here in the back room and Edward forgot all about it, and it must have been seven or eight years now that it had been scarred and battered by the chil-

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dren and ringed with wet milk from the babies' nursing-bottles.

Besides the highboy there was an old box couch where Clo slept when there was a new baby, and two narrow iron beds for the twins, and a washstand, and a scratched low table where the children painted and scribbled, which Laura used, too, for her sewing.

The room was called the children's room, but it was really Laura's. Here she had her sewing-machine and her low rocker, her big wicker basket of mending and the window-box full of scraps and patterns. It was here that Laura spent her life, except when she lay ill after the birth of her children and when she went in to sleep with Edward at night. She came up after breakfast and stayed here all day, cutting and stitching the new clothes, darning the old ones, helping Clo to do for the children and talking with her when she had time to sit and listen, gossiping with Callie and Nona and Maudie Tidball when they ran in to see her. It had taken the place of Mamma's room in her life.

Laura sewed beautifully. She made all of Edward's shirts and underclothes, and her own clothes, and every stitch the children wore; besides odd things, a set of mats or an embroidered cloth, that she did just for pleasure. Her needle had always been a comfort to her; it was the one philosophy of life Mamma had given them. The very day after Clo told her about Kibby and Byrd Lucas, she went to work on Kibby's linen. If anything did happen, Kibby would at least have what was right and proper. Laura did not know what she would have done during those awful weeks if she had not had the distraction of choosing linens from Raphael's and of monogramming the towels and sheets and pillow-cases. And then, when Kibby became engaged to Dr. Porter, there was everything all but ready for her! Laura, thinking of this, felt again her deep, quiet, comforting certainty that things always turned out for the best, and she hitched her rocker

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over to the trunk that stood against the wall and began to look through Kibby's things.

With the wedding only a little more than a month away, she looked through the trunk every day or so to make sure that she had forgotten nothing. She liked to see the smooth piles of linen and underthings, all folded to show their ribbons and fine embroidery. "If I do say it as shouldn't," she thought, "Kibby couldn't have nicer things if she was a rich girl from Melford. She'll have no call to feel ashamed when she goes over there to live."

It was nearly time to give the twins their bath, and Laura began to put the things away again, careful to lay them in the trunk just so, keeping everything in its separate pile. When she had finished, she called down to remind Clo to put on the water, and sat back to wait for the boys, resting in her chair quietly, thinking of them. Laura liked to bathe her children, for they always enjoyed it so and she would feel a sudden warm rush of love at the sight of them naked and laughing, their bodies scrubbed clean and pink. She would pick them up and kiss and fondle them while they squirmed and gurgled, and she laughed aloud with the fullness of her joy in them. But aside from her physical delight in their fresh bodies, she had little real pleasure with the children. Under her gay good nature and her easy ways were the ravaged nerves of a half-sick woman, and whenever they were ill or troublesome she would cry that she could bear it no longer and go to her mother or out to Nona Lucas.

It was Clo who did for them, who slept with them at night when they were ailing, taking them when they cried into her own warm, dirty bed; who cleaned their little bottoms burnt raw by the diapers she washed out for them in strong hot soda and water; who carried their bottle in the big pocket of her petticoat, keeping it warm by her body heat, ready at any moment to thrust its comfort into their little feverish, wailing mouths. Laura's enormous maternity

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fulfilled itself in birth-pains when they were born and in passionate mourning when they died. If they lived, like the twins and Kibby, she loved them with the warm sensual affection she felt for all young things, but she did not want the daily care of them; she could not bear them when they were sick or naughty, and except when they were physically near her, she often forgot them altogether.

Laura had finished bathing the twins, and the round tin tub stood in the middle of the room full of dirty water, waiting for Clo to come up to empty it, and water was splashed over the floor and wet towels lay about. The boys had thrown their dirty clothes in a heap in a corner, where they would lie, perhaps a day or two, until Clo took them away to wash. Laura sat idly, her skirt turned back over her knees, watching the boys dress. They were handsome children, big boys now, nearly seven years old.

As she watched them she reached out and pulled open a drawer in the highboy beside her and took out a pile of little clothes. She began to go over them carefully. She ran her hand through each garment, looking for moth holes or rents or places worn thin with scrubbing and hard wear. The smallest clothes had been darned over and over; many of them would not do to use again. They were some of them almost twenty years old, made for her first baby, Edward, the one who was still-born.

She went over in her mind the babies for whom she had made them. There was Ralph, for her brother, born less than a year after Edward, who had lived miraculously for eighteen months. Then Kibby in 1903. She had nursed Kibby until she was nearly three years old, so she had had good luck, and Alec, for her father, was not born until 1907. They came fast after that. Alec lived two years and died of a fever, and Clare, for her mother, born the same year, caught it too and died; and Billy was born and died in 1910. Then

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came Peyton in 1912 and he died, and the twins, Edward and Randolph, in 1913. She had not been able to nurse the two of them long. They were such big hungry babies that they wore her out, and her milk left her when they were only a little more than a year old. She and Clo had tried desperately to keep the milk in her drying breasts. She drank beer and ate bowls of cereal with rich cream, and she tried hot poultices and cold. She put the babies to nurse, one after the other, every half-hour all day long. She even drank the stuff Clo brought her, made by a colored woman famous for her charms. But nothing could bring back her milk; she weaned the twins and she never nursed a child again. John was born in 1914 and little Laura the next year. They lived only long enough to go from Laura's bed to the crib in the children's room with Clo; they simply starved to death in spite of their trying everything, goat's milk even, and the patent foods from Bissell's drug store. A year later she had a miscarriage; then it was that Hugh Tidball told her she would never have another child.

Laura had borne ten living children and two dead ones in the eighteen years of her marriage, and none of them had come to her easily. They were big babies and she always had a hard time. They were born fine and fat, and only sickened later on. It was as if her enormous vitality all went into their making, so that there was none left to bring them easily into the world or to struggle to keep them there. She had heard women talk of child-bearing growing easier with the years, but it seemed to her that every child was the hardest; that each time her body and will were shackled by a more ungovernable fatigue, so that her children more and more were born in spite of her instead of with her help.

She remembered how with John she had lain exhausted, giving herself up to pain like a boat to a heavy sea. Clo had lost all patience with her and hung over her, scolding shrilly.

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When Hugh Tidball's back was turned she quickly put her two hands on Laura—Laura saw them, the broad water-melon pink palms and the long flexible brown fingers, strong and pitiless—and before she could cry out, pressed down upon her with all her weight. John had come then and there, as Clo said, with no more nonsense. Laura had been glad enough to get it over at last, but she had never felt right since, and John had died, and the two babies after him.

Now, she thought, turning the little clothes over in her hands, she was to face the pain and fear again, after almost four years of peace and Hugh Tidball's assurances. Her body flinched, but deep within her she was perversely glad. With all their agony the bearing of her children were the best times she had known. For a little while she was fulfilled, entirely happy. It was as if there was something tonic in the pain, as if in her easy, careless life her body and spirit relished its bitter discipline. And through all the nine months she felt as she had in her girlhood, desperate and eager, and all the days of the future were poignant with fear and hope. For so long a time, every year had been marked by the birth of a child or by the knowledge of one to come, and the body knew then what it was to be living and ageless; it was only in these last three years that she had grown old.

At first Edward, too, had been at his best when a child was coming. He fretted then about money and success, and spent the evenings making figures, talking of the great things he still meant to do, making fantastic plans for his son's future. Then he went regularly to his office in the Courthouse, and talked once more of giving the Melford men a run for their money. Of course Melford was a thriving town, but the village was a county seat, too, and there was place there for a good lawyer. There was no valid reason why Melford men should get all the cases in the countryside. The two counties divided a seat in the Legislature and it was

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a disgrace that it was always filled by a Melford County man. Once long ago Mr. Tom Weems had contested the seat and won it, and the same thing could be done again.

When she saw Edward turned so serious in his thoughts and eager to share them with her, it gave Laura confidence again that some day she and Edward would have the sort of life he longed for and that he would be happy. Surely if they planned and worked together they could make something of their life. For the short time before the child was born they were anxious and hopeful, talking much together, their slack existence tautened. But that was only at first. Each time a child died the bond between them was broken, until the commonplace miracle of a new life stirred Edward only faintly, was powerless to bring them together or to seem able to change the current of their lives. But it had been more than three years now since they had been about to have a child and they had ceased to look for one. Laura wondered if this time it might not be strange and moving, as it had been to them at first. It would be worth while to find out. It would be worth the pain and trouble merely to feel herself still fruitful. Afterwards, when it was all over and body and mind were again relaxed and languid, she could go for a rest to Mamma or Nona, and Clo would take the baby off her hands.

Laura thought, with a resigned sadness, even while she took pleasure in the feeling of life strong again within her, that doubtless this child, too, would die. She was old to be starting this business over, at forty-two and on the eve of her daughter's wedding. She smiled to herself, half amused and half rebellious at the burden put upon her: "Lord pity me for a poor old thing to be caught again at my age, and at a time like this, too! It will make a nice piece of talk for the town if I'm a mother and grandmother both inside the same year."

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Laura heard Lillas coming down the hall, and she called out to her to wait a minute, and looked to see if the boys had on their underclothes, for they were too big now for Lillas to see them naked. They were only in their shirts and chased each other around the room, squabbling noisily. Deep in her own thoughts, Laura had not heard them, but now the racket they made suddenly jarred on her nerves. She reached out as they ran past and caught them and smacked them sharply. Her hand fell swiftly and impartially upon them both. "Hush that now!" she said, in her rich voice. "Now git. Both of you. And quick!" She gave them each a parting slap without animosity, and they grabbed up their clothes and ran through the connecting door into Edward's room.

Laura laid the baby things back in the drawer, and Lillas sat on the floor beside her, looking through a pile of old fashion-books. "Will you make me my dress for the wedding, Aunt Laura?" she asked. "I'd like best to have you make it for me if you have the time."

"I reckon so," Laura said. "Lord! Lillas, but you and Kibby are two no-count children! When we were your age we could sew anyway and make our own clothes. Goodness knows we learned little enough to help us out in our lives later on, but we could sew and cook a little. You and Kibby have grown up like two babies. I can't help wondering what'll happen when life really takes a hold of you! Well, all that's still a long while off."

She looked down at Lillas sitting cross-legged at her feet, at her childish face and body, all of her small and delicately made. She had thick dark braids, fallen forward over her shoulders, and long, thin, pretty legs that were very slightly bowed. She was sixteen, and she looked like a child of twelve. Laura looked at her and laughed. "All right. I'll make your little dress for you, my honey. Maybe you better skin off and let me measure you right now."

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Lilias slipped off her dress and stood very still in her short white cotton petticoat. Laura took one of the boys' soiled shirts to kneel on, on the wet floor, and said, as she began her measuring: "When your turn comes, sugar, I'll do everything for you that I did for Kibby. There's nothing I know of would give me greater pleasure."

Lilias said, shyly: "I don't think I'll ever get married, Aunt Laura. I don't think I much like men."

"Oh, I don't, either!" Laura said, quickly. "I don't think nice women ever do. But then, that isn't marriage. Not by a whole lot, honey."

Lilias did not reply, and Laura, going on with her thought, asked herself what, after all, marriage was. Nothing much to brag on, that was certain. An old maid had an easier, pleasanter time. What was there about it that women craved, that they wanted enough to suffer all their lives for? But no matter which way they took, women did not have an easy time. Surely there was not much to choose between a heart that ached because it was empty and a heart that ached because it was too full. Every woman had to choose between them. And yet there was a difference; all the difference between life and death. After all, who would not rather suffer than die?

She felt the child in her move for the first time, and a sharp pain went through her so that she felt dizzy and clutched her side. She heard Edward come into the house and call out to Clo, his voice thick with anger and drink, and another stab of pain went through her body and she pressed her hand against her heart. She saw then that her hands were already a little swollen and mottled; she had not noticed it before. She groaned under her breath; the swelling always meant a bad time, why she did not know. She rested a moment, sitting back on her heels, and then she went on with her measuring.

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"I'll make you a real grown-up dress, sugar, just like the ones I've made for Kibby. And you can put your hair up for the wedding if you want to; it's about time, anyway. Who knows but you might catch a beau! Well, child, marriage isn't the easiest road in life to follow, maybe, but I couldn't wish you any better luck."

Chapter Three

IT WAS a hot Saturday morning late in August and Laura was finishing up her pickled peaches. There were still some hard little peaches from the trees in the back yard, and Nona had sent her in four bushel baskets. Her peach preserves were made and labeled, and the canned peaches for next winter, and the great brown crocks of brandied peaches were stored in the cellar, each one covered by a plate and weighted down. Laura was known all over the county and as far away as Melford for her pickles and preserves, and every year she had more orders for them than she could fill. She could have built up a little business for herself, but she would not take the trouble. She said she could not be tied down with promises, except to friends who would not hold her to them. "Goodness knows the money would come in handy," she said. "But we've scraped along without it all these years and I guess we can manage awhile longer."

Laura and Liliias sat out on the narrow back porch, peeling the peaches, just beyond the scorching breath from the kitchen, where Clo stirred the lot on the stove and filled the jars set out on the table with what had been cooked and had cooled a little. They threw the peaches into a big dishpan between them, and the peelings onto a newspaper on the floor. The fruit slipped in their wet fingers, and their arms were wet and sticky to the elbow, and the table ran with juice that dripped into their laps and made dark splotches on their aprons and on the floor around them. The peaches were beautiful this season. Laura said she could not remember when they had been so fine. Often they stopped

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to eat one, bending far over so that juice from it would fall onto the paper on the floor. Flies hung in a black cloud over the table and over the newspaper filled with stones and peelings, and stuck, buzzing fretfully, in the gluey juice on their bare arms. The flypaper spread on the table and windows was black with a harvest of gluttoned flies.

"I don't know when I've seen such peaches," Laura said again, licking her fingers and wiping them on her hem. She raised her arm and pushed her hair back from her eyes, using her inner arm above the elbow. "Lordy! but I do feel the heat these days!" She got up awkwardly and went into the kitchen. She had grown very stout.

Lilias looked after her shyly. For some reason she was ashamed to let Laura see her look. For months she had seen, without noticing it, Laura's thickening body, and then once, as Laura sat relaxed, with her head back and her hands clasped loosely in her lap, she saw her swollen stomach move. A sort of ripple ran under it, like a fish moving underwater, and Lilias had felt herself turn sick with terror and awe.

She was nine years old when the twins were born, and she had realized then that a woman carries children in her body and gives them up out of it with pain. But no one ever spoke to her of such things and she never dwelt upon her little knowledge. She could not remember ever thinking of Laura's appearance before the other babies were born, and now she did not understand why she thought of it so much or why she was ashamed to look full at Laura. But lately she had come to know that there was something about having a baby that was secret and shameful, which she would understand, perhaps—she hoped not—later on. She closed her mind against all such knowledge. She was perfectly happy in the child's world she lived in, and she asked to know nothing of adult mysteries.

When Laura came out on the porch again her face was white and beaded with sweat and she sat down heavily in

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her chair. "This batch of fruit will be a mess," she said. "Nothing shows the way you feel like the things you cook. You might as well try to eat a brickbat as a cake I've made with a headache. You mark my words, Liliás, every last jar of this batch will go bad on me before Christmas. I'm going to put a little mark on the labels and just see if it don't."

Clo came out and stood in the doorway. She was steaming like a black pudding in the tight-stretched cloth of her thin wet gingham dress. Laura flapped her hand. "Phew, Clo! You smell like a billy-goat!"

The old woman went over and sat on the porch steps. "Lord! Dry bones 'u'd smell in this heat."

Liliás stretched lazily in her chair. She ate a peach, lying back indolently, heedless of the trickling juice. She loved the summer-time and everything that went with it. Today she loved the fierce heat and the smell of the fruit cooking on the stove and of the ripe fruit on the table before her and the faintly sour smell of the litter on the floor. She did not mind the flies and stickiness, or the hot pungent reek that came to her from Clo's sweating body and from Laura's and her own. All of it was a part of summer. All of it was better than the cold, dry, musty smells of winter and the clean nastiness of cold, shivering flesh.

Laura got up, putting her hands on her knees and heaving herself up slowly like an old woman. "Well," she said, "my tea party's begun."

Clo stared at her. "It can't be!" she cried. "You ain't but just past the seven months!"

"Pshaw! Don't try to tell me! If I don't know it when it comes on me by this time, I'd be a fool for sure. No," Laura said, laughing, "you can't fool me on this. You better get all that stuff off the stove, Clo, and put on the water. You be sure to have enough hot water."

"You got a long time to go yet, honey. No sense to spile the fruit."

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"It'd do me good to see the water go on, anyway, and as for that fruit, it isn't worth the trouble of putting it into jars."

Laura went into the house and up the stairs, leaning on Clo, stopping every so often to catch her breath. Liliás came up after her, timid and curious.

"You don't have to go yet," Laura told her. "Just turn your back while I slip out of my things. I like to have some body stay with me as long as I can keep my mind on their talk—it makes the time go quicker."

Clo put Laura's soiled clothes away out of sight, and she and Liliás changed the bed, even to clean blankets and counterpane. When they had finished Laura said: "Now you all clean up the room a little. It will all have to be done over afterwards, and I reckon Hugh Tidball wouldn't notice dust two inches thick, but still I don't like to leave it looking like this. If I was to die, it'd shame me clear up into heaven."

Clo and Liliás mopped and dusted and put things straight. It was strange to see a room at Gays Park so clean and tidy, with the shades drawn even and the bureau drawers shut and nothing thrown over the chairs or onto the floor.

Laura sat on the edge of the bed and plaited her hair over her shoulder with swollen, trembling fingers. Then she sat still and watched them, her bare arms crossed on her breast, hugging her elbows and shivering a little in spite of the heat. Now and then she leaned over and rubbed the great purple veins that stood out in knots on her legs.

Liliás never forgot this last sight of her. Her hair was drawn back tightly, showing all its gray. On her haggard face the bones stretched the skin so that at her temples and nose and cheek bones it shone damp and pallid, and there was a heavy dew of sweat over her face and arms. She sat with her feet apart, her coarse gown slack between her knees and tight across her distended stomach under her

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crossed arms. Laura caught sight of herself in the mirror over the dresser and felt the first pang of self-pity since her marriage. Before this nothing had been able to make her sorry for herself, for at its worst her life now was so much better than her barren girlhood. But now she felt a tightening of her heart, and tears that had nothing to do with her pain came into her eyes as she thought: "You poor old ugly thing, to be going through this again at your age!"

Lilias ran and knelt down beside her and wiped the tears off her cheeks. "Darling Aunt Laura! Please, please don't cry!" whenever she thought of Laura afterwards she saw her as she was then, with her dark graying plait over her shoulder, with her haggard face and thick unlovely body, and her heart would fill with a passionate wave of love and loyalty. "Oh, my lovely, darling Aunt Laura!" she wept, wiping Laura's tears away, seeing her so harrowed and distorted and still somehow beautiful.

Lilias and Clo stayed with Laura for what seemed like a long time, and sometimes she was quite easy and said, laughing: "The pain's all gone, Clo. You were right, after all. I've gone and gotten us all stirred up for nothing." And sometimes she groaned, swaying back and forth. "Ah-h-h! I declare it seems to me it gets worse with every child."

All at once she said: "Lilias! Go ask Mamma to come over, and stop by for the doctor on your way. Ask Maudie to send after him if he's not home. I don't feel like there's much time to spare."

Lilias was frightened, and Laura said, looking up at her with her bright narrow eyes and squeezing her hand gently: "Don't you worry if you can't get hold of him right away. Clo's as good as any doctor, and there's a long time to go yet before I really want him. But I like to get Hugh here and make him work for his money. Goodness knows there's so little a doctor can do to help, you'd think they'd be glad to give you the poor comfort of their company! And what-

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ever you do, my baby, don't let on to Callie that I've let you stay here this long, or, bad off as I am, she'd come right over and burn me up!"

Laura had hours of desperate pain. She gave up trying to help herself and lay still and screamed. Mamma rocked in a chair by the window and Clo sat by the bed. Hugh Tidball looked on helplessly, and now and then felt her pulse or examined her, while Mamma pursed her lips and looked away and Clo snorted with outraged modesty and contempt. When he was done he went back to pacing up and down. He did not try to leave the room, and that frightened Clo more than all of Laura's screaming. She sat by the bed, holding Laura when the pains came on her, putting out all her strength. When she could bear it no longer she beckoned to Hugh to take her place, and went out to get the hot water and to put everything ready, although she knew it was nowhere near the end.

Late in the afternoon Laura hemorrhaged. She lay, half conscious, smiling a little with the exquisite relief of the hot soothing blood. She thought the membrane had broken and the child was born, and she looked up at them and smiled weakly before she closed her eyes. Her uterus had ruptured, and in a few minutes she was dead.

Callie had everyone to supper, while Mamma sat with Laura until the undertaker came. Hugh Tidball and Edward looked at each other, hesitating, when Dell came over with word from Callie that she expected them. But Mamma said: "Well, son, the twins must have their supper, and I don't know who'd get it for them here. And the good Lord knows Laura would be the last person to want any of you to go hungry for her."

She glanced over at Laura and shook her head, using her fancy-work to wipe her eyes. "Poor child! she did have a time! It's a mercy if everybody in town don't know about it, and poor Mr. Ellis right across the way! It's a Saturday,

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too, so of course he was at home working on his sermon. It don't seem right, somehow, for a man of God working on his Sunday sermon to be hearing a woman in her pains—especially when he'll be the one to bury her and'll know for certain who it was. Somehow it don't seem real modest."

The men went out while she was talking, but she did not notice them. She got up and went over to the bed and straightened the sheet, pulling it up and smoothing it over the bed. It was cool and soft under her hand. "There's nothing like old-time real-linen sheets," she said, aloud. She had sent Clo over for a pair of her own when they fixed Laura up. They were her best ones, close woven and fine, bordered with real lace and beautifully embroidered. She was proud to see how they dressed up the bed. Laura looked nice, too, with her black brows and lashes marked so clearly on her pale face, and she had unplaited her long black hair and combed it over the pillow. Laura had been a lovely young girl, the prettiest of them all, she thought. "Poor child!" she said, but she could not feel any real grief. Laura had had nothing to do with food or warmth or comfort, the only important things in her life; she would not even miss her about the house. She was old, and bound over utterly to the despotism of her old flesh. "Poor child!" she whispered to herself. "Poor child!"

She went back to her chair by the window and took up her sewing. She sat there rocking, composed and quiet, embroidering and looking out the window.

At supper the twins were shrill and quarrelsome, and Edward Gay leaned across Liliac and slapped them savagely. Hugh Tidball picked at his food, and suddenly laid down his fork and covered his face with his hands and cried, in a high breaking voice: "My God! I'm no better than a vet! Fit for nothing now but to physic the stock of these damn stingy farmers, too close-fisted and ignorant and poor to ever waste their money on a human being when humans come

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so cheap! I've done only that for so many years that it's all I'm fit for. I swear I'll never put my hand to a human being again, so help me God! Look at me!" he cried. "I'm a fine sort of doctor to let a woman Laura's age and in her state ever go into labor! She ought to have had a Cæsarian. I always meant to make her go over to Melford to the hospital when the time came, but I didn't want all the fuss and argument I knew there'd be if I told her so beforehand. How in God's name was I to know that it would come on her two whole months too soon? But I should have operated today myself. I could have saved her, maybe; anyway, I could have spared her all that useless pain. But I didn't have the nerve to try it. I kept telling myself that I had no one but that old black woman to assist me, that Laura'd die for sure under the anæsthetic, that maybe Nature'd pull her through again. God knows it's only that that's brought her out alive time after time! All of that was true enough, but I'd have operated, anyhow, if I'd had the courage. I'd have done it ten years ago, or five. Maybe, two. How do I know when I left off being a doctor and turned into a god-damned country vet!"

Edward Gay did not look at him. Through all his hysterical talk he stared at his plate, tapping on his glass with the blade of his knife. Through the small, monotonous noise of his tapping, Hugh Tidball's crazy words sounded blurred and unreal.

Callie bustled about in a shrill nervous excitement that was almost gaiety. She went back and forth, waiting on the table, for Clo and Dell were crying together in the kitchen and not a bit of use to anybody. When Edward and Hugh and the twins were all quiet for a moment, their grieving and their high wailing songs could be heard clearly in the dining-room.

Matty had gone to bed, but twice her little bell rang frenziedly through the house, and Hugh Tidball got up

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from the table and, after a moment in the hall to put on his doctor's mask of calmness and authority, went upstairs to quiet her.

Lilias could not eat, but she sat on at the table with the others. She was afraid to go up alone to her dark room. Laura was dead. Something sweet and sane and light-hearted had gone out of her life forever. She was numb except for a faint prickling fear when she thought of solitude and darkness. Her heart could not yet feel its grief, but she thought, looking around her, that never again would there be peace and quiet anywhere, or tenderness, or gay careless laughter. Without knowing what she meant by it, she promised herself passionately, "I'll never, my whole life long, love anyone again!"

PART SIX

MATTY

Chapter One

IN THE morning after breakfast Lillas put on her hat and called, "Anybody going downtown with me for the mail?"

Lillas had not gone back to school after Laura died. It was Laura who urged her to go to high school, and to please her Lillas went for one year and sat, silent and puzzled and polite, like a foreign child, through the classes in Latin and algebra. But after Laura died no one saw any reason why she should keep on. She was sixteen years old, and, besides, it meant so much to Matty to have her at home with her.

At the breakfast table this morning Mamma said: "I believe I'd enjoy a little walk—it looks like a real pretty day." And Callie encouraged her: "Oh yes, Mamma, do go with Lillas. It would do you good. And I might come, too. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't mind seeing some one for a change and getting a chance to hear what's going on."

But by the time Lillas called to them they had changed their minds. Mamma was comfortable at her table with her cards, and Callie had had time to think of all there was to do around the house. "I might have known that this morning, of all times, I couldn't go out gadding! Maybe I'll take a stroll this afternoon, if some one comes by to sit with Matty. Now you hurry along, child, so you'll be back with the mail before she wakes up."

Lillas hurried. There was a delicious excitement in walking fast, in the feeling that time, which was usually of no account, was suddenly important. All the while she did her errands there was the exciting feeling that time was running

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short, that she must watch it like fuel in winter-time; measure it out like medicine. There was always things for her to do: messages to leave on her way and an errand at the store. The ladies kept to themselves, and there were weeks when Liliás's daily trips downtown, morning and afternoon, were their only contacts with the village. Life ran narrow and deep. There was the mail in the morning, and the newspaper that came over from Melford in the afternoon. These, with the house and garden and meal-times, filled the day. A glimpse of Kibby in her new car, a visit from Nona with a scrap-bag of news and gossip, were events to be lived upon for weeks.

Today Liliás saw with delight that there was a big mail. On the rare occasions when there was nothing for them she would stop by the drug store to buy one of the cheap movie magazines, or go into Lucas's to get a little present for Matty—a string of beads or a bright colored ribbon.

When she came home Callie hurried to the door to meet her, to see the mail and to bring her Matty's medicine ready in the syringe. She took the medicine and showed her the big bundle of letters in her hand and went upstairs to Matty's room. Everyone's mail went to Matty first.

Matty's room was on the southwest corner of the house, where it got the sun all day long. In summer the sun came in through the closed shutters and filled the room with a swirl of golden dust; and in winter it shone diffused and luminous through the drawn silk curtains Callie had pieced out of old dresses of Mamma's and dyed a deep rose pink.

Matty left her room so seldom now that Callie and Liliás had done their best to make it pretty for her. Callie had painted the furniture herself once when Matty spent a week with Nona Lucas. The big bed, the bureau and the wardrobe, the chairs and table, everything except the washstand which could be hidden behind a screen, she had covered with incredible labor, smearing the dark wood with the sticky cream-

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colored paint that even now came off on the hand in oily streaks. She could not have managed another coat to save her life, but it looked well enough in the half-darkness of the room, and Matty had been as pleased as a child.

Lilias painted the flowers on the celluloid dresser set and on the washstand china, and made the pretty shades for the Delco lights that were put in the year after Laura died.

When the Ellises had them put in the rectory, Callie wrote to uncle John Hack and Ralph and asked for them for Mamma's and Matty's sake. "Of course it seems like a great expense," she wrote, "but I know you feel as I do, that their comfort is the most precious thing in life to us all. I know it would brighten their lives *in every sense*, and they need that cheer just now." It was a habit with Callie to see Mamma and Matty permanently prostrated by grief. Papa, Grand-mamma, Bess, Laura; she never allowed them to recover from one bereavement until another came upon them. She watched them fiercely for colds and fevers, and peered into the future for disaster, so that they might never escape the need for coddling and comfort. "They need," she wrote John Hack and Ralph, underlining in a sort of frenzy, "*everything*, all the *care*, all the *comfort*, all the little *luxuries*, we can possibly spare them!"

The Delco lights were useful to Mamma with her card games, and a joy to Callie and Dell who had cleaned and filled the lamps for so many years, but they were never turned on in Matty's room, for all bright light hurt her eyes.

Lilias opened the door softly into the close, dark room, warm and sweet with the scent and powder Matty loved. She put the letters on the table by the bed and by them the syringe Callie had given her. Then she crossed over and raised the shades and opened the windows wide, letting in the air and sunlight that by Callie's orders cleansed the room once every day. As the strong light came in, Matty turned in the bed, moaning, and Lilias, as she moved swiftly

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about, picking up the clothes and tidying the room, made under her breath a soft rhythmic shushing sound as though she quieted a baby.

When she had aired the room she put down the windows and half-closed the blinds. It was late in the spring, but the mornings were still cool, and now Dell came in to build the fire in the stove. At the noise she made with coal and ashes Matty moaned again, and Liliás stood by the bed, patting her and crooning.

Dell put a cup of black coffee on the table, and at last Matty sat up, pushing her long hair off her face, and Liliás held the cup and steadied her while she drank. Then she gave her the syringe, and Matty, panting a little, pushed back the angel sleeve of her nightdress and thrust the needle sharply and cleverly into her arm. She lay back on the pillow, her eyes closed, her breast beating with her short, quick, shallow breathing; and Callie and Mamma, who had been waiting outside in the hall, tiptoed into the room.

For a moment it seemed as though Matty had gone back to sleep, and then she turned swiftly in the bed and snatched at the letters on the table. Liliás had seen her ruse, and she caught her hand and held it, laughing. "No, no. I must make you pretty first. Now, Aunt Matt, let me fix you up like I always do."

She brought a basin of warm water to the bed and washed Matty's sullen face and brushed out her beautiful long hair and tied it with a ribbon. Then she held up her kimonos, her Spanish shawl, and the coolie coats Ralph had sent the girls when he was in Shanghai, and Matty chose which she would put on. Afterwards Liliás held the mirror while Matty powdered and rouged her cheeks and lips. Mamma and Callie watched indulgently, as though she were a child dressing up for a play, and Liliás cried: "Oh, not too much, Aunt Matty, darling! I like you best just a little pale!"

Callie and Liliás plumped up the pillows behind Matty

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and spread the silk coverlet smoothly over the bed. Then they gave Matty her letters to read. If they did not do all these things first, deferring her pleasure and prolonging it, then the mail would not see Matty through the morning.

Matty seized the letters greedily, opening them and tossing them aside, going through them like a thief for a little present or a colored picture. Sometimes Agnes sent her a whole batch of cheap reprints of pictures in a foreign gallery or of views of a tourist town, and these she loved especially. Sometimes there would be the photograph of a movie star. Matty had an enormous collection, but they came more rarely now, for most of the stars wanted money for their pictures and Callie could not always manage the dimes and quarters. There were always letters from people whose names Matty got from clubs in the cheap magazines and newspapers. She wrote to dozens of them, and begged for their photographs and for pictures of their houses and pets and friends. She seldom read the letters. She cared only for opening and plundering them. When the letters were all opened and strewn over the bed, Callie picked them up and carefully put them straight and read them aloud to Liliás and Mamma. Mamma listened, rocking, picking at her fancy-work, a little skeptical of so much going on outside the village. "Well!" she would say. "Matty's letters! Who on earth will she rake up to write to next!" At some of the more outrageous ones she would shake her head and compress her lips. "Tch! I should think you could all of you find something better to do with your time."

They sat watching Matty open her mail, concentrating upon her joy. She was a picture, her thin hands flying among the papers, slitting the envelopes swiftly and shaking them out, her hair fallen in dark loose wings against her eager tinted face, and the bright scarlet shawl around her shoulders. Liliás breathed with delight, "Oh, Aunt Matty, you know you are a lovely little creature!"

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Matty came suddenly upon a letter which she opened with a cry of pleasure. She leaned far forward to read it, and her hair fell over her face and she tossed it back, laughing, her eyes brilliant with excitement and delight. It was a letter from one of her boys. They came so rarely now; there were few of her lonely soldiers who remembered her, and when they did write it was only to ask for something. Callie lived in terror of one of them turning up some day to make his bold requests at their very door. But the contents of these letters could not dull Matty's joy in receiving them. Now she sought eagerly for the picture of the writer on her crowded walls, and Callie and Liliás dragged the hatbox from under the bed and hunted out the little bundle of his former letters. The bundles were tied with bits of ribbon, and by this time they knew them almost all. Matty leaned over, careless of the rest of her mail, helping them sort through the packets with trembling fingers, and in a moment they had found the one they sought. Now she tore off the ribbon and had all the letters in her lap, fingering them, rereading them, laughing and chattering.

At last Matty sank back on her pillows, exhausted, still murmuring incoherent recollections of the war and her boys. Callie picked up the papers on the bed and rearranged them, and then she read the letters aloud one after the other in her calm voice, taking for granted all the rubbish from lonely hearts, the masses of advertising literature, the sober post-cards from half-forgotten relatives that were to her simply Matty's morning mail.

When she had finished, she and Mamma got out their work-bags and rocked and sewed. They spent the morning in Matty's room, sewing and talking. Something in a letter brought back to them something else that had happened long ago, and they would run on from one thought to another, retelling the same old stories in their soft, uninflected voices. Liliás loved to listen, just as she had listened to Bess's

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stories when she was a little girl; she never grew tired of the past, and always there was something new, some tiny detail overlooked in former tellings, which brought the old tales nearer and clearer, made them different and alive.

The old times seemed very gay to Mamma and Callie now. They liked to recall them, and especially the days before the Captain died, when he would bring home a buggyful of Democrats from a rally, or hail a family driving down the road, standing on the front porch and waving them in. Once old Mr. Gay, Edward's father, had driven past with a carriageful of theater women from Melford, members of a traveling burlesque show. The Captain, blindly hospitable, rushed out to intercept them, and no one who saw it could ever forget Mr. Gay's bland introductions and the Captain's scarlet confusion, his gallant mumblings and evasions, his mortified retreat into the safety of his house, where, something unheard of in the summer-time, he actually shut the front door. They were all sure Mr. Gay had done it on purpose, and they never forgave him, but Mamma and Callie liked to laugh about it now.

More often than not in the Captain's lifetime, they said, they would sit down for dinner fifteen and twenty at the table. After he died life was quieter for them all, but there was plenty of gaiety even then: the young men had been thick as flies on the front porch on summer evenings.

The talk went back to the days before Matty's illness, before Bess left home, before Laura married, or the Captain died, or Ralph went off to Annapolis; back and back to the time when they were all young girls waiting for their first beaux, when they were all children together in the warm tall grass of the side yard, around the stove in Aunt Sophie's little school; and the farther back into the past they went the pleasanter their memories became, until the years of their childhood and of Mamma's young ladyhood were all scenes of idyllic happiness. Liliast listened in enchantment.

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Matty lay back on her pillows, outside the soft flow of their talk, listening dreamily until some word sent her off on her own memories, and then the low murmur of Callie's and Mamma's voices would be punctuated by broken words, whispered or cried out sharply, and small outbursts of whimpering and laughter. In no time at all it would be two o'clock and Dell ringing the gong in the hall for dinner.

"Here!" Callie cried. "The whole morning gone already, and me with a thousand and one things to do!" She hurried Mamma downstairs, with the sense of the wasted morning strong in her and the knowledge that Dell could never bear to be kept waiting. "Now do hurry, Liliass," she said. "What on earth you find to do up here with Matty! If you're late again today there'll be no living in the house with Dell the whole afternoon."

Liliass went over to Matty's bed and took her hand. "Come on, honey. Aunt Callie says we've got to hurry up today. Come on, Aunt Matty. Let me make you pretty for your beau."

Her coaxings were to no purpose. Matty, half roused, pushed her hands away and tossed and groaned. Liliass sat down at the foot of the bed to wait. In a few minutes she cried, gaily: "Here he comes! Hush, Aunt Matty! Listen, darling. Here comes Dr. Hugh right now!" Matty did not answer, but she lay still, and sure enough there was the sound of the Tidballs' front door banging shut. Hugh could never close it behind him, and Maude had put on a spring, and now it shut after Hugh with a sharp bang and a little series of diminishing slams, like the bouncing of a ball. In a moment came Hugh's unmistakable long slow lope along the plank sidewalk.

Matty sat up, sighing and shivering. Liliass straightened the bed, and flew about with powder and rouge and mirror. She touched Matty with cologne and sprayed a little into the air of the room, and ran to bring in flowers from Cal-

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lie's room, where Dell put them fresh every morning, to stay until Hugh or Edward came, for Matty would not have flowers around her at any other time. She said they made her faint. While she did these things, Liliass's heart beat fast with excitement. This daily ritual never lost its thrill for her. One of the men who had loved Matty was coming for his daily visit. In the afternoon Edward would come for his. She was conscious of no disloyalty to Laura when the romance of it pierced her with sorrow and delight, so that her color deepened and tears came up in her eyes. She thought: "Oh I do love to wait on poor Aunt Matty! I couldn't ever do enough for her, trying to make up!"

The sound of Hugh's footsteps had ceased and still he did not come. Mamma or Callie must have stopped him again, and Liliass thought, "How can they!" Matty groaned with impatience, pressing her hands over her mouth as though to keep herself from shrieking. Liliass said, pityingly: "Darling, is your poor head very bad? Never mind. Dr. Hugh will make it better soon."

Liliass never questioned. She did not wonder even to herself about Matty's headaches every day, and the queer wild way she acted when they were bad. All the ladies had headaches. Even she herself had them sometimes, now that she was nearly grown, and Aunt Callie put her to bed and rubbed her forehead with analgesique. Headaches affected them in different ways. Mamraa was sick at her stomach, so that sometimes for two or three days she could not touch a morsel of solid food. Aunt Callie lay as stiff and still as a corpse in a darkened room with a cold cloth on her head. But Laura, when she had headaches so terribly at the last, when her legs and hands were swollen, and her head, as she put it, "thundered," could not bear to lie down. Many the night, she told Liliass, she sat up all night long in a chair with her head in her two hands.

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There was a knock at the half-open door and Hugh Tidball came in. He went straight to the bed and filled the syringe and thrust it into Matty's blue-scarred arm. He never showed that he knew Matty could do it for herself. He stood beside her a moment, feeling her pulse, and then he patted her hand and put it down. "Well, honey," he said, "how you feeling today?"

He did not look at her or wait for an answer, but turned to Liliass. "Give this medicine to your Aunt Callie," he said, and gave her the little bottle of white tablets that was Matty's morphine for the next twenty-four hours. He never left any more than that; in the morning Matty would have to wait for him to come again. They all said it was because he wanted an excuse to see her every day. "Poor Hugh!" they said. "He's never looked at anybody but Matty in his life."

Liliass started toward the door, but he stopped her. "You're looking kind of puny," he said. "Here. Let me see that throat."

He turned her to the light and tilted her chin with his hand. Shaking his head, he said: "I must clip those tonsils of yours some day, sure. You better come over to the office and let me lance them again for you."

Every so often he looked at Liliass's throat and talked about taking out her tonsils, but he never did. He did not trust himself. Now, he thought, if it was something wrong with a horse or cow I'd do it quick enough. But with Liliass he did not trust his hand. These fool farmers, he thought. They wouldn't spend a penny on anything but their stock. Farm animals come expensive, but wives and children are too cheap and plentiful to be worth a doctor's visit; as for themselves, they could go on a patent-medicine jag without paying for his say-so or for his colorless physic. He realized again, as he looked at her throat, that Liliass's tonsils were very bad and that he must make up his mind soon to operate

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or to send her over to Melford. It was a difficult choice, and once again he deferred it.

Lilias went out, and Hugh Tidball sat down in a chair near the bed. For fifteen or twenty minutes he sat there listening to Matty. He sat hunched in his chair, his legs so long that the toe of his crossed leg scraped the floor, and he looked at Matty with his head bent so that there was a rim of white under his pale pouched eyes and the scalp on his big domed head showed tight and shiny and sunburnt through his thinning hair. As Matty chattered he smiled and rubbed his brown knuckled hands together and said: "Umm-mm. Is that so, honey? Well . . ."

He came every day, always at this time, because it tickled Matty to have him there while the others were at dinner. He looked at her and remembered that summer-time when he had sat mooning in a corner of the porch while she flaunted herself at Len Wilson behind the safe hulk of Mr. Tom Weems in a fresh Palm Beach suit. Had he sure enough been in love with her then? He was a young lout, sick with love, in the hot summer night in the moonlight on a porch full of pretty girls. He, for one, did not know till yet if it had been Matty he loved, Matty he had relinquished to Len Wilson, or just all girls, the whole of love, that he had given up to all the slick self-confident smiling fellows who seemed so much better fitted to cope with them than he. He thought that being in love with a woman, or even being supposed to love her, was like marriage; you had a responsibility for her ever after.

At last he got up and went over to her. "Well, child," he said, "I got to be going along now." He took both her hands and brought them together between his own and patted them and put them down. He touched her hair gently. "Well, good-by, honey. I'll be in tomorrow." He went out, his tall thin body hunched, his big head sunk between his shoulders; and remembered, and came back and closed the door softly

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after him. It came open again, as the doors ~~he~~ shut always did, and Matty heard him going downstairs heavily, slapping his hands together behind him. She lay back smiling, waiting for Lillas to bring up her tray so that they could talk everything over together.

Callie followed Hugh Tidball out on the porch with the little bottle of Matty's drug in her hand. "Is it just the same as usual?" she asked. "Lately Matty's been so restless. Sometimes she has us all nearly crazy by the time you get here in the mornings."

He said, "If she gets very bad I'll increase the dose."

At once Callie was alarmed and combative. "Oh, Hugh! Hugh, you don't think we ought to try to cut down instead of always giving her more? Sometimes I think we're not as firm with her as we ought to be for her own good."

Hugh Tidball said, looking at her steadily, "Now, Callie, we've gone through all this before."

"But I think you underestimate Matty's strength. You're always too ready to give in." She added, accusingly: "You're ready to give up before you even start. That's what makes it so hard for me. I'm willing, Heaven knows, to put up with anything, no matter how hard it is for all of us, to sacrifice even dear Mamma's comfort, if it's for Matty's good."

He looked down and sighed, "Ah-h!" He knew what this meant and he braced himself to meet it, hoping it would pass. But often these spells that came on Callie could only be appeased by suffering. Some one must suffer enough to wear her out, to consume the flame of energy, the terrible strength, that filled her and was too much for her to bear.

He said, gravely: "It's getting too late for these tricks now, Callie. Remember, Matty's at a dangerous age."

Callie met his eyes with a clear, hard, inimical gaze, and said in a cool, high voice: "Too late! That's ridiculous, Hugh. Matty's still a young woman with all her life ahead."

Hugh said, "She's forty-four." He added, cruelly: "And

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she's never married. That's too late for tricks with a nervous woman."

Callie cried, in a high, breaking voice: "Still young and strong and with her whole life before her! But you want to make her out old and hopeless for your own purposes!"

When Callie was like this there was nothing to be done. They could only wait until it passed. Poor Matty! Poor girls, both of them! He did not know which one suffered most.

He turned and went down the steps and down the walk, tall, hatless, his high round shoulders lifting his coat so that the seat of his trousers showed, loose and baggy, in folds over his thin buttocks. He was like an immense, sorrowful bird. At the gate he turned his domed and beaked head and said, smiling at her: "Well, honey . . . good-by."

Chapter Two

LILIAS and Matty sat on the upstairs porch, outside Matty's room, looking down the village street. Beyond their house there were no trees upon it, and the row of one-story wooden buildings was too low and the school and Courthouse were set back too far to cast a shadow on the road. The street, wide and flat and empty and full of sun, lay open as a chess-board before them.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the spring day was like midsummer. The stove Dell had lighted that morning had gone out long ago. The porch where they sat was pleasant and shaded from the sun, and the high dim room behind them gave out its coolness; but beyond the railing the afternoon air pressed warm and heavy. Matty let her hand hang over and felt the hot air close round her wrist like water. She spread her fingers and pushed out with her open palm, feeling the heat.

Lilias had her paint-box open beside her. She was too old to play with her paper dolls, but she still drew and colored clothes for them. She kept all her old dolls, and when skirts grew short she cut legs for them out of their prim white petticoats. They had their own names and histories and she and Matty knew them all. Now Lilias frowned and sucked her wet paint-brush while they debated the new dresses she was making. They compounded the dolls' clothes from Nona's Butterick fashion-books and the movie magazines and Miss Shaver's new dresses; and they often spent a whole afternoon planning a new outfit for one of their favorites.

Willy Peach came down the road on his way to Mr. Tom

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Weems' house, where he was doing the spring work. Now that his wife's sons were old enough to work the farm, he did odd jobs again in the village. That sort of work suited him better than farming: each job different in a different place and quickly over and done with, and the money, so much for each hour of his time, clinking straight into his pocket.

Callie called out to him from the front porch, where she was sitting with Maudie Tidball, and went down and stood at the gate. "You won't forget us, Willy? We're beginning to run low." Willy Peach, as far back as she could remember, had got liquor over the mountain and sold it in the village. She remembered him, in the early days of local option, a rangy red-headed boy in his teens, coming round to the kitchen door with corn whisky for the Captain.

"No, ma'am, I won't forget you." He took off his hat and held it on his hip. His thumbs were thrust into his belt and he rocked a little on the balls of his feet, looking down at Callie, all his body from his bent head to his straddled feet in fine balance. In his bearing there was the insolence that no politeness of speech or gesture could ever cover from a woman. With stiffening back and flushing cheeks Callie wished she could put a name to his impudence. "I'd surely like to give him a good dressing down," she thought. "He wouldn't need to give me the chance but once, I can tell you!"

Matty and Liliás looked down at him from the window. Every afternoon they waited to see him go by on his way to Mr. Tom Weems' and they squeezed each other's hands rapturously as he passed. Willy Peach was hard on fifty, but he was still the finest-looking man in the county: his shoulders straight and his back lean and limber, his fair reddish hair thick and gleaming and bleached to a sandiness that hid the gray, and on his neck and his cheek and his bare inner arms the skin under the wind- and sun-burn had still the look of

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being as tender as a woman's. He was like a tall, blond, narrow-eyed hero of the Westerns, with his lean red face and mocking smile, and Liliás breathed, "No common old man's got the right to be so good-looking!"

Matty leaned far out so they could see her, and cried, "Good evening, Mr. Willy Peach!" She drew back at once and Liliás clutched her arm, and they peeped out cautiously, giggling at her daring.

Willy Peach looked up. They saw the sunshine wash over his smooth red face and into his light-lashed peering eyes. He put up his hand to shade his eyes and saw them. "Howdy do, ladies!" He glanced at Callie and their eyes met briefly. There were no memories in the look that passed between them. They had forgotten everything. Callie no longer thought of Matty and Willy Peach and wondered, trembling, what had gone on between them, and Willy himself did not know now, because years ago he had ceased to think of it. A hired man and two ladies cannot live for twenty years along the length of one little street without some things becoming like a dream, at first incredible and later on impossible to recall. And Matty, calling down to him, remembered nothing. She felt simply the irresistible urge to be pert and flaunting that had seized her when she first giggled good evening to Clyde Cover and walked on, squeezing Nona's hand.

Willy Peach said, casually, putting on his hat: "The house and fence look like they could stand a coat of paint this spring, Miss Callie."

Callie did not reply. He had said this same thing each spring for several years, and she wondered if there were a threat, a sort of blackmail, implicit in it. Could he mean that if they did not let him paint the house he might drop them off his list? He had more orders than he could fill these days, with everyone in town so hot after liquor. And it was true that his customers for the most part found other

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work for him. Callie's heart fluttered painfully with fear that Willy might desert them. What on earth would she do if she were left to struggle alone with unprincipled lawless men, bootleggers? Life, she felt, wearily, was a perilous business, depending as it did on the good will of all sorts of men, all of them having to be endlessly cajoled and rewarded, none of them entirely to be trusted. "Well, Willy," she said, "we'll have to see. But if we have anyone paint the house ' . . . "

"That's all right, ma'am. You just let me know any time you need me." He walked away with the slight swagger so ridiculous on a man his age, on a married man with grown children, on an odd-job man in a little country village.

Callie looked after him and wondered if he had been teasing her. It would be like his sneaking, soft-spoken insolence, his easy contempt for everything female, not excepting ladies. She came back to the porch flushed with uncertainty and indignation. "That's one man in this town I do despise!" she said, emphatically, to Maudie Tidball. "What's that Nona calls him? 'That old roan stallion.' Not that I admire Nona's way of talking."

Matty and Liliás watched Willy Peach out of sight, and then their hungry eyes came back to the street. While they waited for some one else to go by they talked eagerly to each other, matching opinions, trading small secrets, of movie actors, of Matty's "boys," of Kibby's new car and hinted pregnancy, of Miss Shaver's beaux and dresses, of the new spring stock at Lucas's. Callie and Maude Tidball, sewing on the porch, could hear them laughing and chattering like two children.

Later in the afternoon Matty came down and lay in the long chair under the walnut tree that had been Captain Flood's favorite place. Some one nearly always came in to sit with her, and people passing by would stop at the fence and talk a minute. Matty had become a sort of legend in the

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village; romantic stories grew up about her and it was the fashion to believe them. Relatives who had lost track of all of them long ago knew about Matty, and remembered her at Christmas and on her birthday; and Ralph and Agnes, who had vanished so completely from their lives, still sent her little presents.

Lately Ralph seemed to have taken a tremendous fancy to her. His alliance with Agnes had never been all he hoped. Long ago he had found her too wearying, too demanding. He discovered now that Matty was the very sister he desired. The thought of her, shut in her room, pretty and invalid, so appreciative of any easy kindness, able to write him such curious and charming and childlike letters, far too ill to travel, roused in him all the tender feelings of a brother. He wrote home for a picture of her, and when Callie sent him a snapshot he had it enlarged and it stood in a handsome silver frame on his piano. It showed a fragile woman in white with a ribbon holding back the thick dark masses of her hair. "My youngest sister," he would say. "A nun with a nymph's face. She's an invalid, poor child. My nymph was put early in a cloister." Ralph had done very well. He had resigned from the Navy and joined a firm of importers in New York, and he could afford to indulge himself in the kind of life and sentiments he preferred. He had a charming small apartment where he gave excellent small dinners, and some woman, married, virtuous, handsome, not too young, served as hostess for him. He had sent Matty her stiff gold-embroidered chasuble and her scarlet Spanish shawl.

Matty was entirely happy, lying in her chair in the shade, her morning's letters in her lap, queening it among her visitors, sending Lilius to fetch and carry, sure that Callie would come with her afternoon heart stimulant in a little glass on a silver tray, and that her syringe lay ready on the table by her bed. She had been humbled and betrayed so often, but in the end everything had come to her. What did

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Willy Peach matter to her now? What did it matter that Len had left her, that Edward had married Laura? She could call any of them to her when she chose to make her dreams. She was happy in her bed, on her couch, on her chair, in the swing. Hugh Tidball came to see her in the morning and Edward stopped by in the afternoon. All she wanted of either was that he should give her some substance on which to hang her dreams.

The only shadow in her life was Callie; Callie's madness was the only thing that still had the power to make her suffer. It might come on her at any time and for no reason; it was impossible either to provoke or to evade it. That was why the word for it in Matty's mind was madness. She could feel it gathering now, like a storm when the sky is still blue and cloudless and there is only a hush, far off behind the trees, behind the mountains, behind the blue, ominous and electric.

Behind Callie's smile and her soft voice and all her customary kindness Matty could feel her madness form and focus, her implacable need to have them suffer. And she, Matty, was always the instrument of their suffering. Suddenly, for no reason, Callie's kind ministering hand would take the syringe from her table, would no longer bring on the silver tray the afternoon glass of whisky Hugh Tidball had prescribed as a stimulant for her heart. Callie would say, coldly, calmly, "You must make an effort, Matty." She would say: "We can't afford to have Willy Peach always bringing liquor to the house. What do you suppose people think?" She had not the faintest notion of what her words really meant. She spoke them in a clear high voice, from the hard bright surface of her mind, and to her they were the symbols of a resolution that was a credit to her. All of them, she said, cheerful, reasonable, subtly obsessed, needed to be pulled up. "We're letting ourselves go," she said, briskly straightening, dusting, picking up, driving Dell half crazy with her

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excursions into pantry and cupboards and ice-chest. "We all of us need a little stirring up." But to Matty her words meant a long agony of the flesh. She would be tortured until she shrieked; she would lie, crazed and uncomprehending, broken at Callie's feet, until Hugh Tidball would be sent for to give her the strength to endure a little more.

Then, just as suddenly, Matty never knew why, it ended. Mamma and Liliás would come out of their rooms again and Callie would go into hers, to lie with a cold rag on her forehead, worn out, ill, fit for nothing but rest and darkness, and yet purged of something. The syringe would be on Matty's table in the morning, Hugh would come in to sit while the family were at dinner, Dell would bring the glasses of whisky on the silver tray, and she would sink back exhausted into peace.

Matty could feel this terror gathering now, and deep within herself she lay quiet, very still, striving to cover herself with the business of living that went on about her, hoping that something would happen, as it sometimes did, to turn Callie's thoughts away from her. She sat under the walnut tree with Liliás, talking to Maudie Tidball and waiting for Edward to come by, and pretended to herself that Callie had no special license to torment her.

The twins, Ran and Ted, came down the street and in at the gate slowly. Chloe went home now right after dinner and would not come back, and Edward and the boys had their supper with the Floods. The boys came slowly, sullen and resentful, and wheeled in a wide circle around Callie, who was watering the flowers and talking rapidly to herself. They hated Callie. They said to each other angrily that she treated them like dirt. She would cry out, sharply: "I declare you two smell like goats! Edward! Can't that good-for-nothing Clo so much as see to baths and clean clothes for them?" When there was company for supper she shooed them out like chickens and gave them their food in the kitchen, pour-

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ing out their coffee too quickly so it splashed into the saucer, splitting open their biscuits and spreading them with butter and preserves with her finger. Now they came across the yard, putting all the distance they could between her and themselves, turning their eyes to avoid her glance, and threw themselves down behind Matty's chair, where they lay on their stomachs, eating grass and watching with bright, relentless eyes the grown-ups they hated, who fed them and clothed them and treated them like dirt.

They softened only to Liliás. She had been so much with them while Laura was alive; she had bathed them and helped them function and seen them naked without averted maidenly eyes and outraged chilly fingers. She still seemed to them almost a child herself. They broke their stubborn, angry silence for no one else, but to her they cried: "Gosh! how we despise all these ole fools! As soon as we get big we'll run away!"

"Ran! Ted!" she pleaded, shocked and sorrowful. "Do you want to leave me, too?"

"Everybody in this damn hole!" they told her, callously.

"Then you must try harder than ever to be better boys, to be clean and to talk nicely and to act like gentlemen. Or what will become of you when you do go away, out into the world, away from the people who love you?"

Her sweetness and sadness, her eternal female acquiescence, brought them to a frenzy of rebellion. "Love! Goddam the old crabs, anyway! I wish they were dead, every last one of 'em!"

From her room in the hotel Miss Shaver had seen the boys come in. She came down now and sat on the porch, on the steps, in her white dress, her head turned away from the Flood yard, waiting for Edward Gay to come down the street.

Matty and Liliás watched her sharply. They liked Miss Shaver and were endlessly interested in her clothes and her

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beaux. Matty whispered, "Now she's waiting for Edward." They looked at her, so assured and clever, so smart and citified, with her waved hair and her white dress she wore because this was the country. "She won't look over this way," they said to each other, pitying and spiteful. Edward was unkind to her and she was ashamed for them to see his unkindness, but she could never stay upstairs till he went by; she must sit on the steps where he would be sure to see her, with her head turned away. Sometimes he would cross over and make her look at him, and then again he would not notice her, and she would have to rise and drift over to them, pale and disdainful, to stand by the fence and talk to Matty. "Poor thing!" Matty and Liliás whispered, snickering a little.

Edward Gay came down the street swiftly, with his head bent and one hand thrust into his breeches pocket, while with the other he broke off leaves and twigs as he came, put them in his mouth and chewed them and spat them out. He wore riding-breeches and an old tweed coat, and his soft wide hat was pulled forward so that it darkened his sallow face. His old clothes fit him too well, followed the line of waist and thigh too sleekly, so that there was something Latin and theatrical about him when he should have approached most nearly his notion of an English gentleman. His dog was with him.

After Laura died he sold the dining-room table to Jenisch, the Jew who had bought the Braxton place outside Melford, for seven hundred dollars. He gave half of it to his fraternity. At least once every year he went back to the University—a slim, blond, clever-tongued man of fifty walking across the lawns and in the doors where thirty years before he had been a fair, slim, witty boy with a brilliant future before him. He cheered at the football games and looked in at the dances and bought corn and gin for the boys at his fraternity. He stayed as long as he could afford to and still make

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his house a handsome present. During the rest of the year at home he filched the money, dollar by dollar, from his household and his drink and his loves, for his next visit. At the University alone he really lived; there the real Edward Gay shook off the eccentric and failure, the rake and wastral, and came alive a cultivated and leisured gentleman.

With the rest of the money he bought his dog. "Lord help us!" Callie cried. "With his house like an outhouse and his children in rags!" He ordered the dog from England, from a famous kennels, and when it came he went down to Norfolk himself to meet it and fetch it home.

He sat down beside Matty with his gaitered legs crossed and his dog stretched at his feet. When Callie brought her her little glass of medicine he said, "I'll have a drink, too, Callie," and laughed at her closed angry face as she went to get it.

He was in one of his worst moods, ignoring Liliás and the children, deviling Callie, flattering Matty, being ridiculously and impudently gallant to Mamma. Callie said, severely, "I'll take my oath you've had more than's good for you already."

"Not enough to hurt me," Edward said. "Not even, Heaven help me, enough to do me any good. You ought to see my office in this weather, the west sun pouring in and the wind blowing my papers over the floor and the dust from the road over them and me. It's a taste of what the summer'll be, but it always seems worse so early in the year. I've got dust in my hair and eyes, and my throat's lined thick with it. Lord bless me, Miss Callie, I'm a thirsty man!" He poured himself out another drink. "Thank God you dasn't bring it to me like medicine, measured out a'ready in a fiddling little glass!"

The boys watched them from the ground behind Matty's chair, and hated, with the peculiar shamed loathing of children, the rouge and powder on their aunt's face and the

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bright ribbon on her hair, their father holding her hand and making a fool of himself before them all, and the strained, hidden, watchfulness of the school-teacher across the road.

Edward saw Miss Shaver get up from the hotel steps and come across to them with the fine, cool assurance that had caught his fancy, and he thought how her appearance belied her. He had noticed her the moment she came, five years ago, and made it his business to go after her. He used to see her at dances in her white dresses with the young farm louts thick around her. She was a pretty young woman with nose-glasses and superior manners and a cool Yankee voice. She dressed in white, which set off her black hair and fine pale skin, and her glasses were a sort of mask before her thick-lashed gray eyes. Edward liked her looks and the clear biting quality of her voice and the precise way she had of smiling. He thought: "God knows it's a pleasure for a man like me to get to talk for once to an intelligent woman." He had had a moment of elation when he kissed her, but he soon found out that anyone could do that who liked. It was only the part of the country she came from, her clear brilliant Northern skin and her clean bitter Northern voice, that made her for the moment different.

Now he was sick to death of her precision and her sham gentility, but he could not rid himself of the habit of her. He laughed at her savagely when she talked to him about literature and a philosophy of life and the new woman, things she had picked up from magazines filled with mincing cultured articles for a thousand exiled women like herself. He laughed at her, but he could not laugh at her estimate of him. She told him so often that he was a brilliant man, that if he had not chosen to throw himself away on a little town he would have been a great one, that if he would there was nothing he could not do even now; and he had come to need it. He had come to need, too, the curious propriety of their relationship; it eased his chronic self-despise. It tickled him

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to exchange books with his kisses and to stop the car on moonlight nights to make love and argue about life. He could not help feeling that a man who tolerated this sort of thing from a woman he slept with had not fallen so low. He could still defer his satisfactions; he could tolerate and even find a certain mocking pleasure in her intellectual pretensions. For so many years he had satisfied himself with the easiest women, that he found a pride in desiring one with Ruth Shaver's reserves and delicacies, who insisted on making difficulties and on a pretense of companionship. He always felt extraordinarily pleased with himself when he had constrained himself to endure one of her solemn, pathetic, bookish evenings.

He pretended not to see her fidgeting at the fence, and then said, suddenly: "Oh, come on in, Ruth. Don't stand outside there like a supercilious ghost."

Mamma took up her sewing, effectively cutting herself off from the rest of them who had no work behind which to hide. Callie compressed her lips and arranged her face to express a polite misunderstanding of anything she might see or hear. Matty and Liliás were roused and startled; they sat with their eyes cast down, flushing and holding to each other's hands. The boys on the grass behind Matty's chair rolled over on their backs and stared moodily at the sky. Once again Edward Gay would amuse himself by tormenting poor Miss Shaver, would strip their relationship of all ambiguity and expose things they could never see with decency. It was all very painful, they felt, and the reverse of gentlemanly.

He said: "I'm surprised to see you out this afternoon, Ruth. I thought you'd have your hands cold-creamed and your face in a mud pack. At your age I should think even a college dance would call for a little preliminary effort." He turned, smiling, to the others. "I'm driving Ruth down to the University tomorrow. You know, Ruth never misses

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a big dance. It used to be the brothers of the kids she taught, who got a kick out of going with the school-teacher; these days I reckon there mostly old pupils on the list. She gets a pretty good rush, though, the times I've seen her—special students and men in the poor-to-middling fraternities, who think she's so 'brilliant' and 'distinguished-looking'; a cut above the regular little flappers, who pride themselves on being able to keep up with her talk. And then there are always some big sniggering hulks who think she must be pretty hot, a girl her age and a school-teacher, still getting asked down to the dances."

Ruth Shaver sat perfectly still, her face drained of all expression by her struggle to decide what to do. Faced by this situation, unsupported by anything she had heard or read, all her glib cleverness left her and her mind closed like a turtle on the problem, what to say, what to do. She no longer even heard his words. Edward laughed at her strained, empty face, her frowning forehead and blank concentrated eyes. "Look at her now. It's always like this with her; she never knows anything until she has learned it. Some day she's going to find it all in a book, what the man said and what the girl said and everything. She'll be enormously relieved. She'll sit and wait, actually longing for me to try her again. But, my poor Ruth, I'll know that you've found it out, and I'll take good care never to be rude again!"

He glanced round and saw that Lilius watched him, fascinated and terrified. This was the way she looked when Callie took out the kitchen mouse-traps in the morning and Dell killed the Sunday chicken. She had put her hand to her face as if to shield her eyes from Miss Shaver's suffering. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" she thought, agonized and inarticulate. It was not the wanton unkindness that terrified her; she did not question his right to that. It was the inevitability of pain. It did not occur to her that it could be avoided. It was a dreadful commonplace of life that mice must be trapped by

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their hunger, that chickens must be killed for Sunday dinner, that Miss Shaver must suffer so that Uncle Edward could, as Callie would say, air himself. Liliias was nineteen years old, and as she thought of chickens to be killed and watched Edward Gay with Miss Shaver, she thought, "Oh, I am glad I'm only a little girl!"

Edward had not ceased to look at her, and now he spoke to her so suddenly that she jumped, "Honey, don't you have a damn dull time?"

"No," Liliias answered him, simply. She could not imagine what he meant. Life for her had been different since Laura died, quieter, less colorful, but never dull. She had Matty for a companion, and there were Callie and Mamma with their stories, and her errands to the store and trips downtown for the mail. Each summer she went out to the farm in June to visit Nona, and she went to her again later on when she opened the cabin at Tabb Springs. Supported by the events of this one day only—Dr. Hugh's visit, and the encounter with Willy Peach, and the awful but still exciting scene she had just witnessed, she repeated more boldly: "No. No, indeed I don't, Uncle Edward."

Callie said, approvingly, but with the smallest flicker of contempt, "Liliias is always happy."

Edward said, quickly, "Then the girl's an imbecile." He poked the dog at his feet. "Even my hound has more spirit than that; he's a long way from contented in this hole, he could tell you."

Callie said: "Liliias! Run in and tell Dell to fix some cake and the raspberry vinegar."

Mamma looked up perkily at the mention of food, waited a moment as though she set her mind, like a clock, to recall her at the proper moment, and went back to her stitching. Callie looked after Liliias running across the yard to the kitchen, and saw her beckon the boys to follow her. She knew there'd be no fuss if she gave them theirs in the

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kitchen, and Callie smiled grimly. Liliás was one to avoid a fuss; all she seemed to want was peace, the sort of thing that sent Callie herself half crazy. She had sometimes wondered if there was anything wrong with Liliás. Well, it wasn't in nature to be so happy with nothing. It reminded her of the Captain, but then Papa was an old man and had had his young gay days; everyone knew that food and sun and sleep was all the old asked for. . . . Liliás was a young girl and she ought to expect more of life, and to be unhappy if she didn't get it. None of them as young girls had been like Liliás. She was angry, though, with Edward Gay for speaking out something she had hidden in her mind. "Nobody in the world but Edward could have brought himself to say such a thing," she thought. She glanced at Mamma, and at Matty, who had fallen into an uneasy doze. "Well, true enough, except for me it don't matter much what anybody says to us."

She blinked her eyes. At times, when she felt unstrung and nervous, certain things made her cry, just as one laughed when one was tickled. She had come to recognize and dread this artificial heightening of her emotions. "I'm due for a spell," she thought wearily, pushing her hair off her forehead. She caught Matty's glance upon her, quite lucid now and horribly frightened. Could Matty know too, and did she foresee the consequences to herself? Callie thrust the thought from her mind in a panic; there were no consequences; the way she felt had nothing, nothing, to do with Matty!

Liliás came back with the plate of cake and the tall cold glasses of raspberry vinegar. It was not the day for ice at the drug store, but they always kept a bottle cooling in water with the milk, and it was good and cold. Callie was as eager as Mamma for the food, to bring her back to herself; she whispered, and she took her glass and sipped it, breathing: "Ah-h, that's good! That's good!" with every swallow. She was glad the boys had not come back from the

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kitchen; she hated the sight of them when she felt like this. If it wasn't for Edward, for his scenes and his children, they could get some peace!

Edward said: "Lilias, how would you like to drive down with us tomorrow? You must have a dress of sorts somewhere, and you could stay with Ruth and she would get you a beau for the dances."

They stared at him, Mamma and Matty and Callie, with their glasses tilted and crumbled bits of cake halfway to their lips. They had a fleeting, extraordinary glimpse of the simplicity of life—that all the difficulties and vain desires and longings were a sort of play-acting, a monstrous sort of etiquette, people invented and clung to, to prevent them from simply taking what they wanted. They had all longed for, and Matty had shut herself up and raved and starved for, what was being offered Lilias so easily. Middle-aged women, they were still the Captain's daughters, his sheltered lambs, and a dance at the University was still the symbol of escape and freedom. And here was Edward, whom they had known all their lives, who had married Laura, and they had never once thought of him as a means to that escape. But then all change was to them so remote, so intricate, so incomprehensible, that they could not have imagined it brought about by anyone already in the pattern of their lives.

"I don't know," Lilias stammered. "I don't know. . . . Mamma? Aunt Callie?"

Callie and Matty cried together, "Of course you'll go, Lilias!"

Mamma said, "I think it would be very nice indeed." It would be nice, she thought, vaguely, nibbling at her cake, for one of the dear girls to have a little innocent gaiety, young men and parties and such dimly remembered furnishings of her own girlhood. "It's been a long time," she said, "since one of you girls has had a little pleasure jaunt."

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"Won't it be grand, Liliás!" Callie cried, awkward and radiant, feeling like a girl herself, and her fine thin nose flushed up in her pale face, as though she were going to cry, and her delicate lips, always quivering, trembled so that she was obliged to cover them. "Aren't you excited to death, child?" she cried behind her handkerchief. How fortunate, how fortunate, that they had always been civil to Miss Shaver, had refused to admit even to themselves that there was anything between her and Edward!

Matty flickered into joyful life. Aside from her excitement over Liliás, she realized that she was safe. A miracle had happened and the brooding storm that had hung over her would be dissipated now. Something had happened to distract Callie's mind!

"She could wear my dress, the yellow one Nona gave me when I went down to the dances." Nona had never taken the yellow dress, and it had hung in Matty's closet these twenty-odd years, wrapped in tissue-paper and an old sheet. Matty went on, dreamily: "Liliás has hair and skin like me, but somehow yellow isn't her color the way it was mine. It's funny how yellow always became me, when everyone thinks of it as a shade for blondes. I remember Hugh Tidball said to me once: 'Yellow's your color because it's a flower color—it's the color of all the best wild flowers, hardy and sweet and bitter, dandelions and goldenrod.'"

Matty spent hours inventing exquisite compliments for herself, trying and refusing word after word, whispering them over to get the sound. The truth was not in them except as it is in colors and sounds that belong together, that make a harmony. Now she lay back with closed eyes, absenting herself to perfect and polish the lovely phrases she had just made.

Liliás said: "Then I'd love to go. Thank you ever so much, Uncle Edward. But you won't be unhappy, will you, if I don't have a very good time?"

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"Why, what on earth can the child mean!" cried Callie, scandalized.

Lilias tried to explain. "I only mean that I won't mind, myself. I wouldn't want him to think that I expected to."

Callie rolled up her eyes despairingly. Edward said, shortly, already regretting his magnanimity: "Well, then, that's settled. Find the child something decent to wear."

Lilias slipped away while Callie woke, wailing, to the realization of all there was for her to do. She hurried off, listing the items aloud to herself as she went: "Telephone Kibby to come over and bring some of her dresses. Tell Dell that Kibby and maybe Dr. Porter will be here for supper. Remember, no more butter in the house. Call up Nona, too, and borrow her fitted suitcase. Stop by the Tidballs' and tell Hugh to come over this evening, for no telling what Matty'll be like after this excitement."

Lilias sat on the kitchen steps in the last of the sunshine and watched her cats, Hittie and Absalom, at their milk. They had come up at once for her to pour it out for them, awaiting it with confidence and accepting it without gratitude. She thought that she preferred cats to all other animals because they offered nothing but themselves. They did not admit the dog's heavy burden of trust and loyalty, they laid no eggs, and you could not eat their flesh. She felt a curious kinship with them; they had no usefulness and no virtue, there was something heedless and graceless about them that she sensed dimly in herself. Like her they expected protection and food and comfort, and preferred an impersonal and beneficent providence—Dell, moving about in an aura of warmth and odors, slapping down carelessly saucers heaped with scraps or slopping over with rich milk, who fed them and forgot them. They would give their caresses freely, but they never acknowledged the terrible demands of love. Lilias delighted in this essential coldness. It was what she recognized in herself. She spent her life buying off love with services and

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affection. The only sort of love she could bear to think of was like hers for Absalom and Hittie—a love warm and animal, entirely for the bodies of small helpless things, asking nothing of the mind and spirit. That was what Clyde and Laura had felt for her. Through all her adoration of Laura, how glad she was that her real love, severe and relentless, had been for Edward; and now that Callie's was for Matty, and Nona's for her own possessions. All she wanted for herself was their kindness and affection, and she always felt safest with Matty and Mamma, whose need of love, she knew with a sure instinct, was turned upon themselves and so would always be content with her service.

She leaned back on her elbows, bending her head to watch the cats and rubbing them idly with her foot. She felt the sun hot and comforting on her outstretched legs and on the straight clean part in her hair. She was happy. She accepted the fact that she would go tomorrow with Miss Shaver and Uncle Edward, but she did not think about it; she was happy now, and that was enough. Dell moved ponderously about the kitchen, getting supper; Aunt Callie scurried about for clothes and satchels; the twins skulked with their cake in a far corner of the garden; Edward Gay and Ruth Shaver crossed the street slowly, talking, bickering; Mamma and Matty and herself dreamed in the sunshine and waited for their supper.

Kibby brought over some lovely dresses; she took them out one by one in Matty's room and held them up, and Liliás tried them on. But they were all too ruffled, too stiff, too short for Liliás. Her meek head with its middle part, her thin exquisite arms, her slim bowed legs, were incongruous with taffetas and organdy.

Kibby said, "None of them really looked like Liliás to me, so I brought this one, too." She took out her wedding dress that Laura had made, its heavy white satin crushed and a

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little yellowed. "You can have it if it suits you. Heaven knows I never wear it."

Callie caught her breath—Kibby's wedding dress! But she compressed her lips; she would not voice her disapproval, for she could see already that it was the very dress for Liliás. She slipped it over her head and smoothed it down over her prim unfleshed body in the short white cotton petticoat. It was too big, but even so it molded her like a dream. Callie scissored out the sleeves briskly and cut it a little lower in the neck. Then, kneeling, she folded in the fullness from underarm to waist, while Matty leaned up on her elbow and they debated, flushed and eager, the position of each pin.

There was no question, the dress did suit her. The bodice and the full formal skirt, the fine dulled satin, the faintly genteel, old-fashioned quality of home sewing, exactly suited her. With her smooth dark braids, her beautiful soft eyes, with her small brown shiny face, its nose powdered whitely at the tip, with her V of sunburn melting to the ivory color of the dress, and her thin, childish brown arms, awkward in their grown-up bareness—she was delicious.

. . . Matty shifted herself in bed and threw her Spanish shawl around her shoulders. "Ahh-h!" they breathed. The gentle brown prettiness was suddenly vivid and compelling. Looking at them, Liliás smiled shyly, her eyes uncomprehending and soft and bright.

A sudden violent grief overwhelmed the older women. Matty caught Liliás's hand and kissed it, weeping, her wet distorted face pressed against her arm. Callie, still kneeling on the floor, reached up her arms to her, tears on her white rapt face: "Oh Liliás, you must be happy! Child, child, you must have your chance!"

All their thwarted, passionate girlhood rose up in them, all their forgotten hunger for life. And, "This is your chance! You must get away and be happy!" they cried together.

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Callie added, firmly, drying her eyes: "Don't worry. You will have your chance, Lillas. I'll see to that!"

"Yes! Oh yes!" Matty cried, falling back on her pillow in a storm of weeping.

"But I'm happy here, Aunt Callie," Lillas said. "I don't want anything in the world but just to stay here like I am." She looked from one to the other of them, disquieted and bewildered. "If you want me to go around more and see people, Kibby will let me come and stay with her sometime. Won't you, Kibby?"

Callie sat up late, sewing on the dress in Matty's room. Even when she had finished and pressed it and wrapped it carefully in white tissue-paper, she did not go, for they were both too excited to sleep. The next day they saw Lillas off, laughing and crying, standing out in the road and waving until the car was out of sight, as though she were a bride.

In two days Lillas was back at home. "I had a grand time," she said. "Everyone was sweet to me. Byrd Lucas was there and he was sweet to me, too." Upstairs in her green-shadowed underwater room, she wrote in the top of a little writing-case that had been Laura's: "One week and one day before I was twenty years old, Uncle Edward took me to a dance at the University." In the years ahead, living with Mamma and Callie and Matty and listening to their tales, how could she know without such evidence what was bright fancy and what bright memory?

Incredulous, Callie and Matty waited for the changes that must come—the confidences, the letters, the young man at their door; it was impossible to believe that she could come back unchanged. But nothing further happened to Lillas except that now, when he was at home, Byrd Lucas came in sometimes from the farm to see her.

Chapter Three

MATTY and Liliás lay in bed, half asleep, in one of Nona's square back rooms. It was seven o'clock, and the yellow of the bare plaster walls and of the corn-colored matting and of the varnished pine furniture swam together in the early light. It was an east room, and before the sun itself was visible the heat and light rolled in like fog through the high curtainless windows.

Matty rolled from side to side of the big double bed, moaning with discomfort, and Liliás lay flat on her back on one of the narrow iron cots, the damp sheet clinging over her breast and outstretched arms and falling in a hollow between her legs. It was time to get up, but they lay there stunned by the yellow heat and the hot drone of flies on the ceiling. Just over Liliás's head a single light-bulb hung from a sort of knob in the middle of the ceiling and flies swung endlessly round it in a black eddy. It was so hot that her senses blurred, and sight and sound and sensation mingled, and the yellow light that filled her eyes was the heat that blanketed her body and the steady hum of the swarming flies was the dazzle of the hot sunlight on the ceiling.

It was time for her to get up and fix Matty's medicine and sponge her face and neck with a cool cloth and help her dress; for Nona allowed no nonsense about not coming down for breakfast; but Liliás lay with her eyes half closed, in the hot wet hollow of the bed, the damp sheet giving out a spurious sort of coolness over her, and all her limbs heavy and lifeless.

Downstairs, Hannah Peach swept the side porch and talked

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to Gran'ma through her open window. Gran'ma doted on the girl. "I should of had her for my own daughter," she said. "Ivy for my son and Hannah for my daughter. That would of been a grand pair, and Mr. Lucas could 'a' had Till and Sarah, good girls as they are, and welcome. Why on earth Byrd Lucas ain't satisfied with Hannah, without chasing after a bit of dry meat like Liliass!"

In the next room Nona played with Hannah's baby. Hannah and her baby had one of the good front rooms now, and Aunt Vi had taken Gran'pa's little old room off the back porch, and Byrd slept like a visitor in a back bedroom when he was at home. Liliass could hear the fat chuckles of the baby and Nona's brisk voice. It would be lying on the hot rumpled bed in a wet diaper, laughing and kicking, and Nona would be sitting beside it in a fresh starched dress, her hat already pinned to her neat hair, poking with her little hard fingers at its naked belly.

Nona loved babies when some one else had the bearing and rearing of them. "I'd 'a' taken a dozen any day, ready made," she said. She did not mind the crying and the mess and the sour smell of the bedclothes. "My good mattress'll smell like a polecat when he's done with it," she said. "But shoot! there'll be another one to lie on it by that time, I reckon!" Nona never fretted about such things, and neither did Hannah Peach. She had never, even at the first, been bothered or shamed by her baby. It was no trouble to her; and it seemed in nature for her to have one, as though her big, healthy, laughing body must have produced it in spite of every virtue, in spite of all precaution, from its own excess of vitality. Somehow, no one ever spoke of Hannah's baby as her slip, as her trouble, the common terms of the countryside. It was so obvious that she must have had it, and that she would have more, as a strong healthy tree bears its fruit in season.

Nona looked at her sharply when she first came to her,

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her clean pink dress swelling over her shameless bulk, big, unembarrassed, handsomer than ever in her pregnancy. "Well, Hannah, did Willy throw you out?"

"No'm," Hannah said, calmly. "Nobody threw me out, Mrs. Lucas. But I'm not staying at home afterwards. Papa, Mamma, the boys, all of them, would take advantage. They wouldn't mean to, but you know how it is with people when they've something to hold over you. They'd try to work it out of me and think they could hinder me at this and that. 'Look what we've done for you,' they'd say. 'Look what we've put up with.'"

"Why did you come to me?" Nona asked.

"I thought, with old Mrs. Lucas and Miss Vi not so lively any more, you'd need a girl to help out in the house. I reckoned if you got a good strong girl you wouldn't bother yourself about a baby."

After a moment Nona said, cautiously, "Why don't the man marry you, Hannah?"

Hannah laughed. "Pshaw! I'm not twenty years old yet. I got plenty of time before I worry myself about marrying."

"Well," Nona said, deliberately, "he might go farther and fare worse, in my opinion."

Hannah's calm eyes did not flicker and she laughed again. "I'm not worrying."

"You can come over right now if you want to," Nona decided, briskly. "It'll save trouble in the end for you to have it right here, and you won't bother me any. You're not the kind that's going to make trouble for anyone borning your babies, I can see that to look at you. Lord, no! You'll be over it in no time and stronger than ever. It'll liven things up a little."

It would have been hard for Nona to explain why she took in Hannah Peach and her baby. Certainly pity had no part in her decision. If they had been a puling, miserable pair she wouldn't have lifted her hand for them; not if what everyone

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thought about Hannah and Byrd was true and she had sure proof of it. She liked to fill up her house and she liked Hannah. She liked the clutter and the feeling of life it gave her to catch a glimpse of the baby kicking on the bed and of Hannah moving about her work easy and vigorous, to hear the boy's loud crying through the house and Hannah's mellow voice and full laughter. Most of all she liked to go her own way, ignoring the opinions of other people and their scandal and discomfiture, secure in her authority over her own household.

Through the flimsy wall Liliás could hear her playing with the baby, and even catch the stiff rustle of her dress as she got up from the bed and smoothed down her skirt. On the porch downstairs Hannah paused in her sweeping to light a cigarette, and the sharp small sound of the match was audible through the open windows. All sounds were submerged in the heat and magnified by it, like goldfish wheeling in a glass globe.

Nona walked across the floor in the next room, and the baby, seeing himself deserted, gave a short preliminary cry, a sort of yelp of rage, and Nona said, briskly, "Scat now!" and shut the door smartly on his screaming.

Liliás knew that Nona would come in in another minute to rout them out, and that she must get up at once before she burst in on them to rouse and startle Matty. But 'as often happened to her, she lay still and saw herself get out of bed and cross the room to the washstand and go about all the business of the early morning, while her limbs were still locked in inertia. The delusion was so strong that when she realized that she was still in bed, it was as if her body were sundered; and when she did rise and wipe her face and neck with the cloth dipped in the warm stale water on the washstand, and carry the basin over to Matty's bed, it seemed as if she did it all for the second time.

Liliás was drying Matty's face and hands when Nona came

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in and cried: "Well, lazybones! You better hustle! It's breakfast-time already. Here, Matty, up with you now! Hang on to your nightie!" She snapped the sheet back and over the foot of the bed, and Matty, dazed and shivering, sat up obediently. It was wonderful what Matty put up with at Nona's house—the ruthless hurry and bustle, the loud voices and the glaring light in her bedroom, the lack of all consideration for her special weaknesses.

At breakfast Byrd Lucas came in late, already steaming from the field and barn, and snuggled his hot face against Matty's cheek and neck, saying: "Well, how's my best girl this morning," before he pulled out his chair between Aunt Vi and his father. Matty blushed and tittered, and once she murmured, "Now, Len!" Byrd looked round the table and grinned and winked, but no one, not even Gran'ma, would meet his glance.

Hannah Peach got up to get him his hot biscuits, and as she passed him on her way to the kitchen he caught at her apron and put his hand on her waist when she stood beside him. "Here!" she said, careless and amiable. "Take your biscuits and behave yourself."

· "Oh-ho!" he cried. "So a man's not to have his pickin's in this house! I'll have to see about that!" He made a grab at Aunt Vi, who screeched and clutched at the tablecloth, dragging it into wrinkles and slopping the coffee in the full cups; and Nona and Gran'ma laughed, proud and adoring; and Ivy chuckled and slapped his knee, giving place good-naturedly to this younger, lustier male.

After breakfast Liliias and Matty went through the side yard to the hammocks slung in the woods just outside the gate. They spent the morning there in the cool and shadow, drugged to idleness by the swinging and the rustle of the trees and the shifting light, while Nona and Hannah hustled about the housework and harried Aunt Vi and Bonnie in the kitchen. They had no share in the busy morning; they did

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not even spread up their beds or pick up in their room after breakfast. Nona did not expect it of them. She was relieved to see them cross the yard with their books and writing-cases and settle themselves in the hammocks under the trees. She was glad to get shut of them in the mornings.

At eleven o'clock Liliás went into the house for her hat. Matty's mail was almost as important as ever, and every morning she walked to Miss Jane's, half a mile away, where the road forked, to intercept the mail-carrier before he swung off on the wide circle that would not bring him round to Nona's until three in the afternoon.

She found Byrd on the porch when she came out, as she always did when she did not meet him coming out of the gate to the lane or barnyard, and he accompanied her. The red clay road had been bleached and pulverized by the July sun, and they walked down the middle of the road, both enjoying the fierce sunshine and the feel of the thick, hot, white dust. They did not talk much, for they were neither of them great talkers, and they loitered a little to avoid a visit with Miss Jane.

Miss Jane was an old Irishwoman who had come over years before to look after her uncle in his lone old age. He had left her his farm and she had sold all but the house and barn and a field for the cow. She had not kept even the horse, for what good was it to her with no Church near enough to drive to? Once a year she went into the village with Nona and hired a buggy from old-man Peach to drive into Melford to make her Easter duty. She lived all alone without even a nigger girl to help her, and, so they said, no clock to keep her days and nights in order. People saw her light around the barn at night and vowed she'd gone out then to feed the stock and chickens; and often farmers going into town at dawn had seen her run to the door to watch them pass, with a piece of bread and a tin cup in her hand; and sometimes her cow lowed mournfully all day long because she had

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forgot to milk her. Her back door stood open toward the barn, and the pigs and chickens ran in and out, and a couple of cats dozed by the closed door and shuttered windows on the sunny front porch. She ate with her animals—sour milk and potatoes and stewed greens, an egg, cornmeal stirred up with water and baked in any dirty dish that lay to hand. She would not kill her pigs and chickens for food, and they would have overrun the place if the bad winters had not killed them off and she had not traded them in for coffee and tea and sugar and cornmeal.

No one could say how old she was, she was so withered and brown and her eyes and hair so raven black, but they must have made her out an old woman if they took the time to count back, for she had been there for years. "Well, I hope and pray she'll last out my time," Nona said, wrinkling up her nose. Gran'ma could tell a gruesome tale of the only time Miss Jane had been ill and she went up with a neighbor to nurse her, and they had to shovel out the filth before they could start in to set the house and kitchen to rights. "And as for Jane," Gran'ma said, "I had to take a currycomb to her!"

·. Every spring Nona drove her into the village in the Ford, and every fall she sent Jim up to chop a great pile of wood toward cold weather, and once or twice a week Bonnie took up a present of meat or white bread or a jar of pickles. She had no truck with the other neighbors.

When Byrd and Liliás reached Miss Jane's stile, she flew out at them from the door of her blank shuttered house like a little black shrunken cuckoo from an old clock. No doubt she had watched them coming down the road, peeping at them round the corner of the house or barn, and then rushed in at her back door and down her dark dirty hall to spring out at them.

"Come in! Come in!" she cried, beckoning them on. They came as far as the porch and fell back before the stench

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that assailed them of mingled filth left so long lying that it no longer had the smell of ordinary dirt. "Come in!" she piped. "I'll give you two sweethearts a drop of my grape wine—it's a grand strong drink."

"Pshaw now, Miss Jane," Byrd said, "you ought to feel shame to try to tempt us law-abiding people. We'll sit out in your arbor and have some of your grapes instead."

"'Law-abiding,'" she cackled, peering at him through her black matted hair, her hands twisting under her soiled apron. "Hear him, sweet Jesus! I'm up and about at all hours and I've still got my eyes and ears, praise God, and I know what I know." She looked at him slyly. "Nothing can pass down this road from dark to dawn that don't come past my door. Chew on that awhile, young fellow."

"You're a born blackmailer," he said, and she shook her apron at him as though he were a pert cock or one of the bold ragged toms on her porch. "Be off with you now, you and your sauce and your name-calling!"

They waited for the mail in the little grape arbor, eating the big purple grapes that, springing from the reeking soil, had a strong sweet rotten tang to them even in their prime. The road lay three ways before them: on one hand the curve around which they had come, and on the other the long straight slope up which the mail-carrier toiled now in his straining Ford, and in front of them the fork that led by Peach's farm and out toward Tabb Springs and halfway there forked again to make a circle with the road past Lucas's. They were the principal traffic lanes of the county, the road to the village and the only outlet to the South Post Road. The way to the world, to church, to market, even to the light summer pleasures of Tabb Springs, for all that section of the county lay past Miss Jane McGehee's door.

Byrd wondered carelessly how much the old woman knew. A stroll down the road with Hannah Peach or another girl in the evening, a late homecoming from Peach's after a

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game of cards, a hasty trip to Melford in the Swope boys' curtained car after the last of the buggies and roadsters of the courting couples had gone in and before the farmers' early-morning trucks, would be all the same to her. It was a wonder that Liliás did not ask him something, crazy like any other girl to know the whole meaning of any word she caught. He experienced something of his old irritation with her childish acquiescence, her child's feeling that what she saw and heard about her belonged to another world and was no concern of hers. But then, he thought, neither he nor she was the kind to meddle in other folks' affairs. Neither of them, he reckoned, comfortably, popping the fat grapes between his full smooth lips and spitting the tough purple skins out into his palm, was much of a hand for talk.

On their way back home Byrd said, "Let's have a look at the cows before we go in." They turned into the big pasture that lay between the rising land of the Lucas place and the Smileys' hill—a level field whose fence stretches two miles along the road, broken only by the wagon road up to Smiley's, where there was the covered spring-house with its water cress and a bright shallow creek bordered by willow trees; where the grass grew rank and green and the sweet wild clover and all the flowering weeds pushed up thickly—a rich lowland between two reeking hills. The cows, brown and cream-colored against the vivid green, drank at the creek, knelt in the shade of the willows, cropped the lush grasses.

Byrd left Liliás by the fence and walked out into the field, calling the cows nearest him by name, stretching out his smooth brown arm with a twist of grass and flowers in his fingers. He was handsome in the bright sunshine in his blue shirt and riding-breeches, sleek and thickset and agile, his muscles straining under the skin-tight breeches and the thin wet cotton shirt. The cows came up one by one as he called them, leaving off their cropping, lumbering up from their knees, and nuzzled at his hand. "Feel 'em," he called to

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Lilias. "Like silk." She came up timidly and touched their smooth fat sides. "Gosh!" he said. "They're pretty creatures!"

They went back through the new cow-barn with its rows of clean stalls, and pipes running overhead. The cows stood in long patient lines at milking-time and two men went down the aisle between them, with the buckets for stripping. The barn was empty now, and the white walls and the cement floor had just been flushed down, and Byrd and Lilias picked their way gingerly across the glistening wet, and a fresh sweet-smelling coolness steamed around them as the hot dry air sucked up the new moisture. "Gosh! it's a peach!" Byrd said, looking round him.

He had a swell life. He had never known the smallest uneasy stirring of discontent. He loved life on the dairy farm and orchards, it was so clean and compact, none of the common dirt farmer's hurry and shiftlessness and confusion. Ivy was a good business man before he was a farmer. He had expanded cautiously, so that they were not burdened with debts and taxes. Their dairy served only Melford and the county and increased modestly with the demands upon it. Their apples went to a broker in Melford and were sold in England, to the same buyers year after year, the whole lot off their hands at once at a good or bad price, according to the times.

Byrd Lucas was a farmer, his sort of farmer, by choice of all possible occupations. He had the land in his blood from his mother, so that his feet craved the springy grass of his pastures and the rich wet earth of his plowed fields and the twigs and dry leaves of his woodland; and as he walked his fingers felt naturally for the fruit on the heavy low branches, for a switch to break off and flick against his leg, for a sweet-tasting leaf to put between his teeth, for a handful of crumbling black earth from the garden. His father's merchant sense made him revel in the machinery that milked

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the cows and sprayed the fruit trees and cultivated the few fields and truck-garden that were merely a luxury they allowed themselves. Black Jim and his young brother Samson were luxuries, too, dawdling behind the plow, puttering in the garden and with the hogs and chickens and work-horses, unconsidered stock, and driving into the village on small errands. Byrd liked to work with them, sharing the labor that eased his country-bred body and his Gay blood, and savoring the lack of urgency in all they did. But he liked to see the trained men in the barn and dairy, brisk and careful, uniformed in their clean overalls; and the tenant's men in the orchards, spraying, covering, pruning, overseeing the pickers in season, sorting, wrapping, boxing the apples in the packing-sheds. The head men had been to agricultural colleges, the hands were as specialized as factory workers, the whole organization ran like a business—a grand business concerned with living products in the air and sunshine. It was backed by the general store and the little hotel in the village, that showed a small steady profit every year, and the solid investments Ivy had made in the good war years. Ivy Lucas cared nothing for his land apart from his other possessions; he had a born storekeeper's pride in his flourishing business in apples and dairy products, and he kept a skilled eye on his trades and his books; but the farm life was in Byrd's bones and blood; the store and the hotel seemed no concern of his, but he never looked at the land without thinking, it is mine.

He looked forward to the time when he should have the whole management of it, but without impatience. Now he spent only the summers at home, and in the winter was a football coach at V. M. I. He liked to talk about the other jobs that had been offered him: the Standard Oil would have sent him to China, a famous cigarette company tempted him with a fat salary, the Marine Corps had lusted for him after he graduated, he had been offered a dozen jobs selling stocks

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and bonds. When he left V. M. I. he was a famous young man, one of the best known in the whole country. For two years he had been picked for the first All-American when it was an almost unheard-of honor for a player in a Southern school, and his team had cleaned up one after another of the proud Yankee universities. Heavy, slow-talking, amiable, childishly tickled by all the fuss made over him, he had been interviewed and photographed wherever he went. His smooth, brown, fleshy face with its fine big teeth and wide foolish smile was as famous as a movie star's. All his mannerisms and characteristics—his grinning silence, his "sir" and "ma'am" to the reporters, his flashy clothes, his "Ah, pshaw now!" and easy laughter, were known from one end of the country to the other. He was inordinately pleased to give out interviews, to pick up with admiring strangers, to sign footballs and sweat shirts and albums for clamoring small boys, but it did not in any real sense turn his head. Neither the adulation nor the good-humored ridicule really penetrated to him. Without giving it a thought he enjoyed his fame and dismissed it. He picked up a little money indorsing this and that, but he turned down all his other opportunities without regret. He knew, without taking thought, that he wanted to go on coaching football in Lexington in the winter-time and in summer come home to the dairy and apple trees and the work in the fields beside Jim and Samson in the strong, hot, unobstructed sun.

"Do you all want to ride over to Melford this afternoon?" he said. "You and Hannah, if she can get away? We'll see us a movie and have dinner at the New Hotel. My Government money is burning up my pocket."

Byrd's two months' service at Fort Myer, with the after effect of mumps and influenza that had kept him off the football team one whole winter and had him running up to Walter Reed every time things were a little slow in Lexington, brought him in a small but regular income from

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the Government. Byrd was a country boy and not used to crowds; he had promptly had measles his first winter at V. M. I. "I caught eve'ything at camp there was to catch," he said. "If the war had only lasted awhile longer I'd have had me T. B. and been set up for life." He prized his Government money as he did his winnings at cards, and his checks for indorsing sporting goods and cigarettes, above all legitimate income. It tickled him immensely, it seemed to him broadly humorous proof of his superior wit and acumen, to get money like this for nothing.

He put on what he called his gray outfit to drive the girls over to Melford. He had bought it the summer before in Europe. "Pshaw, now!" he said. "A soldier ought to see him one sight, anyhow, of Paris and the battlefields." He made all his expenses taking over a crowd of wealthy cadets who felt that no one could be better qualified than a famous football star to show them Europe, and Ivy gave him a handsome check besides. They had a grand time. Byrd, stolid, grinning, amiably sure of what he wanted and amiably oblivious to overcharges and all moral obligations, was an ideal chaperon. The cadets thought so; the waiters and taxi-drivers and English, French, German, and Italian girls thought so; they all of them had a gorgeous time.

It was in Italy that he finally purchased his gray outfit, complete to spats and stick. All the others bought suits and sweaters and golf hose in London, but English clothes left him cold. French and German clothes struck him as faintly ludicrous. But in Italy the English cloth, the suave Latin tailoring, the southern eye for dash and color, entranced him. An expensive Italian tailor made his pearl-gray suit and light overcoat, and he shopped himself for the splendid accessories: the jaunty stiff pearl-gray fedora, the gray suède shoes and spats, the gray ties with their changing hints of purple, the subtly harmonizing lavender of the shirts. He was whole-heartedly delighted with the result and ordered

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another set complete in browns and beiges, and bought himself a cane for each suit. Completely satisfied himself with the richness and subtle detail of his ensembles, he was impervious to all comment and to the amused and startled glances that followed him. He wore his exotic raiment as jauntily and casually to church in the village, to the movies in Melford, to the country dances, as he had on the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. And presently his sartorial taste was justified by a vast burgeoning of spats and canes and stiff pearl-gray fedoras on all the dashing buck niggers in two counties.

Byrd drove into Melford with Hannah Peach and Liliás and parked the Ford in front of the New Hotel, so that they walked almost the whole length of Main Street and down two blocks of a side street to the movies. He wished to show off the girls and his gray outfit; it was the logical thing to walk, complicated by no thought of gallantry. Across the streets, down the aisle of the theater, through the lobby of the New Hotel, he piloted the girls, grasping firmly an arm of each, well above the elbow, grinning proudly between them, convinced that a pretty girl reflected credit upon the man who escorted her and two pretty girls twice as much as one. Little boys on the street and youths lounging on the corner by the drug store called out to him with prideful nonchalance: "Hi there, Byrd Lucas!" And he responded with a magnificent careless condescension: "Hi, son! Hi, bud!"

All three of them enjoyed themselves. Liliás was always happier when Hannah was along, ready to laugh at everything, to comment on everything, to take all the burden of entertainment on her strong shoulders. With Hannah beside her, so loud, so gay, so enormously vital, Liliás could enjoy the people and the store windows, the movie and the dinner at the New Hotel, without a conscience-stricken feeling

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that she did not contribute her share to the entertainment which was an escort's due.

Hannah was entirely happy. She adored Melford. If she could not go to town, she would go into the village and walk up and down its single dull little street, so that she could mingle with people, greet them and feel their eyes upon her. She accepted the notice they paid her, as pleased by it and as unanalytical of it as Byrd himself. People stared at Byrd because he was a good-looking young man and a great football-player, not because they disapproved of him or laughed at his gaudy clothes; and they stared at her because she was a fine, handsome girl, full of life and friendly, not because she had left home to work out and had had a baby. People looked after her and Byrd Lucas because they were both born to be looked after.

On their way back home that evening, Byrd said: "It's early yet. Let's stop by your place, Hannah, for a game of cards. Come on, honey. It ain't been the same place at all without you."

They turned into the dirt wagon road that led to Peach's farm and found three cars already parked before the door. The other farmhouses round about all stood open after the hard day's work, eager for company to drop in, but men had always gathered at Peach's. The front door was open. In the front room Gene and Paul Swope, Hannah's half-brothers, played bridge with the Raphael men from Melford, and Edward Gay and Willy Peach looked on. In the dining-room, Roy Bissell played solitaire on one end of the dinner table. He had pushed the table cover back, and one of the Pollard boys from the hotel at Tabb Springs sat reading a newspaper, his elbow on the crumpled cloth.

They all looked up as Byrd and Lilius and Hannah came in and said, "Hello." Willy Peach came up and spoke and hooked his arm in his daughter's. "Shall we start us up another game? Mr. Gay there wants to play." "Lilius don't

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play," Byrd said. "That makes just the even four of us." Without speaking, Hannah began to clear off a small round table, moving the lamp, lifting up the cloth by its four corners and depositing it with its contents on the floor. She drew up the chairs and took out the cards and paper for the score. Then she said, settling herself and moving the lamp a little closer to her, "It's been a long time since I had me a real good game of bridge." It was the first time she had been home in the evening since she had had her baby.

Lilias sat in a rocking-chair and watched them. She hoped Byrd would bring her here often. There was something exciting in the way they accepted her presence and ignored her, in their silence, in their absorbed faces, glistening in the hot light of the oil-lamp, in their constant half-automatic smoking. It fascinated her to see them light one cigarette on another, pausing to draw on it, focusing their attention on it for the briefest instant until it was alight, and then forgetting it until it burned down to their fingers. All their mind was on the cards which fell with a smooth, thrilling precision—snap, snap, snap, snap, pause—on the wooden table.

Mrs. Peach came in to the room silently and emptied the ash trays, brought fresh cigarettes, refilled the glasses with ginger ale and smooth, white corn whisky, and then went back to finish her work in the kitchen. The smell of coffee came in and the sound of her knife on the chopping-board as she cut the bread and cold meat and pickles for the sandwiches. All her movements in the room were quiet and deft from long practice, and her face was expressionless as she waited on them. She did not speak or even glance back at them as she went on into the kitchen. These goings-on almost every evening were nothing to her; they neither displeased her nor gave her any pleasure. She was the sort of woman to whom nothing mattered and nothing was trouble if it kept her men at home. She was glad to see Hannah, though she could not feel for her as she did for her husband and the

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boys. When she passed her she stopped and put her hand on her shoulder and whispered: "Well, Hannah. You come back in the kitchen when you all get ready to eat and help me bring in the plates and coffee." It would be obscurely comforting to see Hannah come in through the swinging door, large and steady, and to have the company of another woman in the kitchen.

Hannah was winning like a man, quiet and serious, her upper lip and forehead beaded in the heat, her large hand steady as she laid down her cards and wrote the score on the columned paper beside her. Once her father said: "It's good to have you back, Hannah. It's nervous not having a fourth in the house unless there's company. Somebody nearly always comes in, but it keeps you looking toward the door. It'd have been bad sure enough in the winter-time."

At the next table the Raphael men were restive. They were usually keen players, but tonight they could not keep their thoughts away from Hannah. Her presence on these evenings, even in the old days, had always excited and disturbed them. She played like a man, friendly and impersonal, taking in their money or paying out her own without quibble or coquetry. But that did not make her a man, and the knowledge that she would be there at the card table and not out in the kitchen with her mother, where she belonged, had given the games at Peach's a certain savor, had made them, when they started out from Melford, ambiguous about their destination. Then they had begun to hear the rumors about her, and during the last months they had watched with a furtive, half-jocular, half-pitying curiosity the changes and thickening of her body. The first meeting with her afterwards would have disturbed them under any circumstances, but her appearance here tonight, with Byrd Lucas, of all people, and the girl they said Byrd was courting now, was too much for them as orthodox Southern gentlemen, as good Jews and solid citizens. They were outraged and delighted.

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They glanced at her constantly over their cards with their handsome, lustrous, veiled brown eyes. Gene and Paul Swope, undisturbed by any action of their sister's, and expert with the practice of countless long winter evenings, coolly took their money from them.

It was a good game, the cards were falling evenly, and they played very late. Toward midnight Hannah looked pale and tired and she sat with her left hand pressed against her breast. After a little a dark wet splotch spread between her fingers and she got up quietly and went into the dining-room and put a folded napkin in her dress. The Raphaels glanced away hastily and flushed under their smooth sallow skin.

Going home, Byrd took a bottle out of his pocket and drank and passed it to the girls. Hannah and Liliás each took a swallow. The white, warm, syrupy liquor burned down their throats and into their stomachs, where it lay like a core of fire and gave off a steady glow that spread slowly over the whole body, pleasant, exhilarating, distinct from the external oppressive heat of the close summer night. Byrd drove with his arm stretched along the seat in back of Liliás and his hand on Hannah's shoulder. After a little his arm slipped down and tightened, and he moved his hand so that it rested on Liliás; she could feel it warm and smooth and heavy against her neck.

When they got home the house was closed and darkened except for a dim light left burning in the hall; everyone had long since gone to bed. To their astonishment, Matty was sitting on the stairs, her eyes on the front door, and when Byrd turned up the lamp on the table to light them up to bed, they saw that she was crying.

Chapter Four

THERE were two gala nights a week at Tabb Springs now that the young Pollards were coming into power. Mr. Gus Pollard's stiff purple locks were still omnipresent, but in the background; he still reserved for himself the prerogative of making a monthly trip to Lexington to buy supplies—a trip which was attended by rumors of secret iniquities and from which he returned ruddy and pressed and polished, his glossy locks an even inkier purple; he was still omnipotent at the desk and in the dining-room. But his sons had gradually taken over everything outside the hotel. They advertised now in the Melford and Lexington and Staunton papers; not for regular summer visitors, for the hotel and cabins were still overcrowded, but for transients, gay parties who would drive over for dinner and dancing in the evening or rent the “camp” on Black Mountain for fishing over the week-end. On the river side the boys had boats for rent with bright colored awnings; on the mountain side they had put rustic tables and chairs all along the trail for picnic parties, and they had built the cabin on the top of Black Mountain which could be used for camping, with food and servants sent up from the hotel. On the Green the grass was cut and the mosquitoes no longer outsang all other insect noises. In the pavilion at the end there was a regular pianist every night, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays there were a real jazz band and Japanese lanterns and a booth with ice-cream cones and coca-cola. One of the Pollard boys sat outside on the porch every night, with his chair tilted back against the wall and his newspaper held to the light from the doorway, to

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collect the fifty-cents admission. They could always count on a few outsiders in these spendthrift pleasuring days, though the regular guests paid only on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Then the cars lined the road darkly and parked with dimmed lights on the Green itself, and the dance floor was so crowded that the couples could scarcely move, and the porch rail was an unbroken line of young men in white trousers and girls in brief blached dresses, who bent forward over their dripping ice-cream cones or tilted the bottles of lukewarm soda water that gleamed purple and red and orange in the light from the windows. Those who craved stronger refreshment stepped outside discreetly, picking their way down the crowded steps, disappearing into the shadows with whispers and stifled laughter, returning flushed and conscious, the girls touching their lips with their handkerchiefs and the young men patting down their coats over their hip pickets. All over the Green, to the parked cars, even up the stony trail to the mountain, strayed couples in search of privacy and darkness.

At the supper table on Wednesday evening Byrd asked the girls to drive over with him for the dance.

Aunt Vi cried, "They can't both go, surely!" And Gran'ma looked up and said, tartly: "Can't you make up your mind which one you're after, son? In my day a boy didn't beau two girls to a party, and times haven't changed so much, I reckon, that it don't still take one hand to drive either buggy or motor-car." Nona said, briskly: "And why shouldn't both the young things go, I'd like to know?"

Aunt Vi whined, rolling up her eyes: "Well, you know what it was the last time, Nona. Not more'n three days ago they were off gallivanting the whole afternoon and evening, and you and Ivy out, too, and Matty taking on worse and worse every minute, and the baby upstairs screaming his lungs out for his mother!" She glanced scornfully at Hannah. "A crying shame! Him not ten months old!"

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Hannah smiled slightly, crumbling her dry slice of salt-rising bread. She had no butter and no water at her place, not even the cup of strong coffee that was an integral part of every meal. She was trying hard to dry up her breasts, and it was difficult for her with her big healthy body and in this thirsty heat. But she persisted, and now she nursed her child only twice a day, early in the morning and before she went to bed.

"Nonsense!" Nona cried. "The baby will have to learn to eat like a Christian some day, and now's as good a time as any. And I guess we can manage to entertain Matty between us."

Ivy spoke up with gallant alacrity: "That's my job. That's just the sort of work that would suit me down to the ground, Miss Matty."

Matty said, flushed and bright-eyed, with a curious prim daring: "But I'm going, too. I wouldn't miss going, for anything. I know Byrd didn't mean to leave out his best girl."

There was silence at the thought of Matty going out in the evening! Matty at Tabb Springs on a Wednesday night, cavorting with those wild young ones until all hours! They could not believe their ears. It was incredible, it was even not quite decent. What on earth would Callie have to say? Once more the men rose gallantly to the occasion. Byrd roared, cheerfully: "Not on your life I wouldn't leave you, honey!" And Ivy moaned: "Say now, what about me? Can't you all manage to take Nona instead?" And Byrd slapped his father heavily on the shoulder. "Now you just keep out of my affairs, you old buzzard!"

The tension was broken. Their shocked wonder at Matty's outburst faded and disappeared; the ladies all laughed together gaily at the incorrigibility of the male.

Byrd came into the pavilion boldly in advance of his three ladies. With a sort of crude instinctive chivalry, he left the two pretty girls standing at the doorway where they were

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sure to be claimed directly, and whirled away with Matty in his arms.

Everyone stared at her. She was a curious figure among the girls with their bobbed heads and their brilliant brief silk dresses, neckless and sleeveless, belted low about the hips; with their long beige legs and their dyed satin slippers or gold and silver sandals, second-best because no one really dressed up for Tabb Springs, and smudged and tarnished from Finals at the University and Washington and Lee. Matty wore a white dress of thin eyelet-embroidered cotton, made modestly with a round neck and little sleeves. Her golden skin, smudged with raw white powder at nape and elbows, showed darkly through the countless tiny holes of the sleeves and bodice. She wore sheer black silk stockings with her high-heeled, exquisitely clean, white canvas slippers, and she had a red velvet ribbon around her waist and a little red velvet bow tucked in her hair. She was amazingly youthful in a place where practically every girl was worked thin and sallow at twenty-five and was a faded, settled woman at thirty, and she was still superbly handsome. There was not a prettier girl on the floor than Matty Flood, brown and slim and feverish, whirling about so furiously in Byrd Lucas's arms.

But there was something oddly dated about her appearance that kept the dancers' young startled eyes on her long after their natural curiosity had been satisfied. Her dress was short and cut from one of Nona's latest patterns, but there was something in the lovely, prim, worked stuff of it, in the fullness of the gathered skirt, the tightness of the cherry-colored ribbon drawn about the waist, that made it one of the party dresses of her girlhood. This something went deeper than her clothes, as though the stays and ribbons and ruffles of her youth had actually remolded her flesh and bones; her pretty legs had the exposed brazen look of a ballet girl's calves in the 'nineties, there was a hint of pompadour in the

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fall of her thick black hair, and there were the rich discreet curves of bust and haunch and calf that had disappeared from all the female forms around her. She was not a woman of forty-five who had come to the dance dressed and powdered like a young girl; she was a young girl of twenty years ago miraculously returned among them.

Byrd felt this as he danced with her around the room and smiled politely down at her, patting his palms together when the music ended. It was impossible to take her presence there as a joke or to treat her cavalierly. All the scrubbed, brushed, damp-palmed country boys who bore her off in turn, coming up punctiliously as each dance ended without a word passed between them as to their duty toward a lady, felt it too. Unconsciously they held her away from them; their extended arm stiffened, their easy sliding steps became a decorous circling. They were their fathers, politely guiding a young lady through the disciplined dances of nineteen-hundred.

There were nearly twice as many men as there were girls, and every girl on the floor had a good time. Matty was the gayest of all, taken for every dance, whirled excitingly from strange young man to strange young man as each dance ended. Occasionally Byrd cut in on her, large, damp, glowing, braying with joyous laughter, and dashed her off in a faster time with dizzier circlings. During the intermission he took her out on the Green and bought her a bottle of some stinging drink and gave her a cigarette to puff clandestinely in the darkness. Matty clung to his arm, twittering and ecstatic, thrilled with their daring, not a day over twenty-one.

This blissful, feverish evening with its anonymous crowd of clean polite young men, its Japanese lanterns strung about, the crash and throb of its marvelous orchestra, took the place of all the dances she had missed. It was the midyear dance at the University, it was the parties with Len Wilson in Louisville, the balls with Ralph at grand New York hotels,

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the colorful festivities of war-time. It took the place of all these in her mind, at once displacing them and removing forever any doubt of their reality. Never again could her dreams of gaiety lack form and substance.

They were among the last to leave. Hannah and Liliás walked on ahead with a crowd of boys around them, and Matty followed, clinging to Byrd in a sort of blissful coma. When they reached the car one of the Swope boys asked Liliás to come to the dance with him on Saturday, and Byrd broke in, bold and pugnacious: "Not if I know it! She comes with me or she don't come at all!" He laughed and took hold of Hannah's wrist, pulling her toward him, and said as he had to his father: "You all keep hands off my business! These three pretties belong to me." Matty pressed his arm.

Saturday night at supper Nona said, quietly: "Hannah, you better take tonight to do some mending for your baby. Last time I dressed him there wasn't a button or a whole buttonhole that hit together."

"All right, 'm," Hannah said, and went on placidly with her dinner.

Matty and Liliás and Byrd looked up, surprised and questioning. But Nona and Ivy, Gran'ma and Aunt Vi ate, looking down at their plates with the set unconcerned expression of people who have settled things beforehand and have no need to meet one another's eyes.

Byrd said, boldly: "Hannah's going over to the dance with us this evening. I guess she'll have to leave the kid go ragged till tomorrow."

Aunt Vi muttered, "There's been too much leaving of babies." She did not dare to say more for fear that Nona would change her mind even now for the pleasure of over-riding her.

Gran'ma said, grimly: "If Nona's so set on this sewing it'll have to be done this evening. There'll be no needle threaded in this house on a Sunday!"

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"It's not only the mending," Nona said. "Hannah don't expect to go off and leave her baby every evening."

"Then we'll all of us stay," Byrd said, angrily. "We'll all stay home if a whole houseful of women's not enough to look after one little baby."

Nona folded in her lips. She was fond of Hannah, but there could be too much of a good thing. Bonnie went home after supper; it would take a real disaster to keep her from going off to rub heads in the evening. Aunt Vi with her weak, implacable obstinacy refused to raise her hand. And Gran'ma, eager as she was to abet her favorite, was too old to run up and down the stairs. Nona had told them all plainly that she had no intention of finding herself saddled with the baby. "Besides," she said, "if it's Liliass he's after, let 'em go alone and get the courting out of their system." She thought, too, that it would be easier that way to keep Matty at home. She would not open her lips about Matty even to the family, but she was not going to have her running to dances, at her age, half sick and wholly irresponsible, making herself the talk of the whole county. If Hannah was kept at home, thinking of this and that to kill time in the evenings, stirring them all up with her vigor and gaiety, it would help to keep Matty satisfied and docile. "What she don't like," Nona thought, "is being left behind with the settled old folks while the young ones are all off gallivanting."

Aloud she said to Byrd, above the angry clatter he was making with his knife and fork: "You and Liliass go on, the two of you. Hannah went Wednesday, and twice in one week's too much for her with her work and the baby."

Liliass said, quickly: "I'd rather stay at home with Hannah, please."

"You suit yourselves," Nona said, pacifically. "Lord knows there's the whole summer ahead for the three of you."

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Matty broke in: "Then let's just you and me go, Byrd. We don't want to sit around the house."

Byrd stammered a little: "Why—I guess nobody's going from here tonight, Miss Matty."

Matty's face reddened and her eyes filled with tears. "Then you had no right to tell Mr. Swope I wouldn't go with him!"

"You going to a Tabb Springs dance with one of the Swope boys!" Nona said, sharply. "I declare you must have lost your mind!"

Everyone at the table stared at Matty, and Byrd said, laughing: "It was Lilius Gene Swope asked to go with him. Gene!" He roared with the loud amiable unpremeditated laughter that registers only the simple humor of a situation. "Ah, pshaw now!" he said. "Gene Swope and Miss Matty!"

Matty leaned across the table and cried, with her voice shrill with anger: "I'd like to know what you know about it, Byrd Lucas! You were too busy holding hands with every little hussy in arm's reach of you to know what anybody said!" She was crying when she finished speaking, and she sat furious and unashamed, sniffing back the tears like a child.

After a minute Nona said: "Come on now, Matty, Finish your supper."

Matty answered in a low voice, "I'm not hungry, thank you."

Ivy said, kindly, blushing a little, "You'll surely keep me company with another biscuit."

"Oh, let me alone! Let me alone, can't you?" Matty pushed back her chair and, holding her handkerchief to her contorted face, ran out of the room.

Lilius got up to follow her, but Nona motioned her to sit down. "Oughtn't somebody to go out after her?" Ivy asked, uneasily. Nona shook her head. "Just leave her be."

The Flood girls would never eat when they were angry.

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All her life Nona had been familiar with that gesture of pushing back a plate at the table, or with a call down the steps in a tone of fictitious cheerfulness, "I don't want any supper." How many times she had asked about some one of the girls and been told in a whispered aside by the others, or by Mrs. Flood with tolerant resignation, "Oh, she's not eating!" A hundred times Nona had gone over in the evening after supper, early in the evening with the sun still shining, and found the Captain sitting at one end of the porch with ruffled dignity, and Mamma and the girls sewing at the other with an obstinate and unnatural cheerfulness; and some one would mention that Callie or Bess or Matty wasn't hungry and had gone up to bed.

No one could make them eat. No one could question their right to be tired and to go to bed early. They were the Captain's lambs and nestlings, in everything under his benevolent dominion, but he was helpless before: "No thank you, Papa. I'm just not hungry." They could punish the omnipotent Captain, they could punish the family and the unfeeling world, by going to bed while the others stayed up, by refusing to sit down with them at the table. The world could not challenge fatigue and lack of appetite. The world, out of common decency and politeness, must heed them and be anxious about them for a moment, going to bed in broad daylight, refusing to eat a good supper.

"Don't bother her," Nona said now, as Mrs. Flood had said so often. "Just let her get it all out of her system." She thought that later on she would make a point of going up to her, with a plate of cookies and a glass of Gran'ma's good strong scuppernong, and talk her out of her temper.

Ivy cleared his throat. "Well, it's a Saturday night. I got to be getting down to the store sometime." He left the table hurriedly and gave Hannah a pinch and a pat for a good sensible girl as he went through the kitchen. She had left the dining-room quietly and was helping Bonnie with the dishes,

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standing by the open door to get a little of the evening coolness, scraping the plates into a bucket beside her and stacking them on the table. He felt dimly that there was no pleasanter sight than a big healthy girl going about her work, unruffled by quarreling and a hot kitchen and the faint squalling of her illegitimate baby. He paused with the swing door half open and felt in his pocket. "Here," he said. "You're a fine girl, Hannah. Go buy your baby some clothes with buttons on 'em."

When the others came out from the dining-room they found that Matty had not gone upstairs, but had compromised with the darkness and the horse-hair sofa in the parlor. Hesitating in the hall on their way to the coolness of the front porch, they could see the glimmer of her white dress where she lay huddled on the slippery discomfort of the parlor sofa. Byrd winked and waved to them to go on, and outside on the porch they could hear his coaxing voice: "Now, honey, you can't tell me my best girl's going back on me this evening!"

In a few minutes they came out together, Matty still hanging back like a spoiled, conscious child, and sat down apart from the others on the steps. The air grew cooler and a wind that as yet they could not feel stirred the tops of the trees. It was going to rain. At first Byrd talked only to Matty and then cautiously included the group behind them on the porch. They answered as cautiously, anxious to take their cue; everyone, even Aunt Vi, made an effort; and by the time the rain came down in earnest, driving them all to the side porch outside Gran'ma's room, they were as easy and as cheerful as ever.

Chapter Five

THERE WAS no breeze around at the side of the house, and the rain came down straight and solid as a wall. All the yard sounds and the rustling of the trees outside the yard were shut out, and the porch was as silent and airless as a closed-in room. Hannah lit the lamp inside in Gran'ma's room, and a few big lumbering June bugs and clouds of tiny gnats, driven in by the rain, roused and flew about. Matty and Byrd and Liliass sat together in the wooden swing at the angle of the porch and swung back and forth to the slow creak of the heavy chains, and the rain blew in on the back of their necks and the gnats swarmed stickily on their bare arms and faces. Once a June bug caught in Matty's hair and she clung shrieking to Byrd while he laughed at her and tried to get it out.

The rain stopped too soon and it was hotter than before, and the unspent tension of the storm tightened the air.

"Let's have the table," Gran'ma said, and Hannah brought it out. She closed the door to Gran'ma's room so there was only the dim light from the window on the porch, and she and Gran'ma and Nona and Aunt Vi sat down, their joined finger tips making a circle in the center of the small square table. After a while the night cleared and the moon rose over the trees in the wood outside the yard and shone on the table and their arching fingers.

Nothing happened. Now and then some one muttered rebelliously, but Gran'ma hushed her and bade them wait a little longer. She had a passion for the table. She had tried the ouija-board, too, and automatic writing, but soon discarded

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them. "It's too easy," she said. "If anybody's going to play monkey tricks, let 'em work to do it." She had this small square solid table kept cleared and ready in a corner of her room, and when it was brought out eyed it with a pleasant feeling that it would exercise both ingenuity and muscle to juggle that. During the long winter evenings the whole family spent hours around it, dominated by Gran'ma's obsession, and awed in spite of themselves by her success with the spirits and her calm acceptance of her power. This was the first time they had had the table outdoors, and the whole proceeding seemed queer and futile here in the open air with the moon shining and the clear empty night all around them.

Gran'ma whispered fiercely across the porch to stop their swinging, and Lillas and Byrd and Matty were still, their feet set firm and flat on the floor to check the grinding creak of the swing, and there was a dead silence; but still nothing happened.

"The spirits are stubborn tonight," Gran'ma said at last, testily, as though she spoke of contrary children, and Byrd snickered.

"Don't dare!" Matty cried, shrilly. She was trembling with excitement. This was the first time she had ever seen them at the table.

"Here!" Gran'ma said. "You take a try at it with us, Miss Matty. You look to me like you might stir up something. They say it's all a matter of electricity. Vi here's got about as much electricity as a washrag!"

Aunt Vi got up, grumbling that they'd had plenty of luck before with her playing, but that she was glad enough to be let off, and went upstairs. Matty took her place eagerly. Lillas whispered nervously that she ought to stop Matty somehow; she knew Callie wouldn't like it if she knew; but Byrd laughed. "Pshaw! Let the old girl get her fun. I feel kind of sorry for her. Anyway, you nursemaid her enough."

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After Matty left them, Byrd lay back in the corner of the swing with his head against a cushion. His feet were still on the floor to keep the chains from creaking, and the whole length of his leg pressed against Liliás, solid and heavy and warm. Looking down, she could see his thick smooth thighs swelling the white flannel trousers he had put on for the dance at Tabb Springs, and the little ridge where his under-drawers ended. He rolled up his white shirt sleeve and stretched his arm lazily across her lap, and she began to stroke it lightly with the tips of her fingers, the way he loved. Whenever he felt lazy and comfortable, he stretched himself out by some one of the women and rolled up his sleeve for her to tickle his arm. Liliás was not afraid of him in this mood, and she minded touching him no more than she minded brushing Matty's hair for her, or rubbing Callie's aching forehead. She even found the warm lax weight of his arm across her lap and the warm pressure of his leg against hers, pleasant and comforting.

Presently they were conscious of something unusual in the silence about them, and Byrd lifted his head and Liliás's fingers paused and rested on his wrist. The table had begun to move. They seemed to feel it before they actually heard the small distinct eerie tapping. Liliás shivered and Byrd sat up straight beside her and held her hand.

The table was quiet again, and Gran'ma began the absurd long-drawn-out ritual of questioning in her sensible, calm voice: "Are you a spirit and have you a message for anyone here? Please reply with one tap for yes and two for no."

The table tapped once, and then again after a short interval.

Gran'ma said, "Does that mean yes to both questions?"

The table tapped once.

Gran'ma said: "Is the message for me?"

The table tapped twice for no.

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"Plain as day," Gran'ma whispered in a triumphant aside to them. "Sometimes you can't make 'em seem to understand or do a thing for you." And this time she spoke as though she commended a clever and willing child.

"Is it for Nona?" She addressed the table again. "For Hannah?" The table did not answer. "Huffed," she whispered. "But we'll get around that."

"Is it for Matty, then?" And she added severely, "Answer me, please!"

There was one loud tap and Matty gave a little shrill squeal and Gran'ma shushed her sternly. Liliás murmured: "She ought not to do this. I know it isn't good for her. I ought to make her stop." Byrd squeezed her hand: "If you did, Gran'ma would skin you alive."

The table broke into a series of explosive tappings, ludicrously like a dance of rage, and Byrd and Liliás stopped talking, a little frightened.

Gran'ma asked, "Who are you?" But for a long time the table was obstinately silent, and Gran'ma coaxed it gravely, offering to send away anyone it did not like or who had offended it. At last, to her reiterated question, it gave a sulky tap, and she asked triumphantly if the spirit would spell out its name for them. Patiently she went through the alphabet, and when she came to L it tapped again. But they could get no farther; each time it tapped L and stopped.

Matty gasped: "It's Len! I know it's Len Wilson and he has a message for me!" She thought swiftly: he's dead then! So he was to be vindicated and her pride assuaged, romantically, mysteriously, after all these years! But the table rapped sharply no. They all guessed some one in turn, and Matty went back again and again to Leonard Wilson, but the table refused to change its uncompromising negative to everything they said.

At last Nona said, slowly: "Is it—Laura?" And Liliás caught her breath and pleaded softly, clutching Byrd's hand

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in both of hers: "Oh! Oh, please don't let them drag Aunt Laura into this!"

Instead of answering, the table began to move. It was an extraordinary sight. The table slid across the porch without making a sound, the four women around it rising hastily and thrusting back their chairs awkwardly with their feet. None of them could say afterwards how it got down the three shallow steps to the ground, but they found themselves on the side path, stumbling along, striving painfully to walk with it and not break the magic circle of their finger tips. It went straight down the path, with a sort of effortless floating, as though it were buoyed up by an invisible current and Gran'ma motioned fiercely with her head and Byrd and Lilius understood what she wished and ran ahead, swerving out into the wet spongy grass, to open the gate into the woods. The table tilted itself through the gate and somehow the women squeezed themselves through with it, and it came to a stop in the little clearing where the hammocks were slung between the trees. Here it tapped L over and over, to Gran'ma's patient a-b-c, and finally it spelled out "thinking." After that one long painful effort, it would say nothing more. Gran'ma took it through the alphabet endlessly, but it merely tapped out "thinking," "L," "thinking" over and over in a sort of crazy rhythm without waiting for Gran'ma to reach the necessary letters.

Nona whispered, shakily: "She used to sit right here for hours—that last summer when she visited me. Don't you remember? She seemed to like to be by herself; not gloomy though; Laura never was that. But she sat out here alone, just sat and sat, with her baby-sewing in her lap."

Matty cried: "What do you want? Let me talk to her! Laura, what do you want to say?" The table ignored her, and she screamed, hysterically: "Say it! Say it! Oh, I know you always hated me! You were jealous of me, that was it!

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Always jealous. Well, I won't say you didn't have a right to be! You couldn't help knowing he was happier with me!"

They tried to quiet her, 'shhing frantically, leaning over and hissing at her softly without moving their hands on the table. At any other time they would have heard her wild talk eagerly, but now their desire to listen to the spirit outweighed any curiosity about what Matty might have to say. "'Sh! 'Sh!" they hissed at her, absurd and serious. "Let the spirit speak!"

Lilias cried: "It's not true! It's not Aunt Laura! I know it's not!" But only Byrd heard her through Matty's screaming. The dogs roused at all this unaccustomed noise and began to howl, and for a few minutes there was a hideous pandemonium. Then the dogs stopped as suddenly as they began, and in the hush that followed the women felt the table quiet under their hands, with the absolute deadness of a disconnected telephone.

They turned on Matty angrily. "Now you've done it! Why couldn't you be still!" And Matty went off into one of her fits, laughing and crying and screaming incoherently, and Gran'ma shrugged and said: "For pity's sake, get her in before she gets the dogs started again and rouses up the whole neighborhood!" And Nona and Hannah led her into the house, with Gran'ma stumping angrily behind. Lilias wanted to follow them, but Byrd held her back. "Let the others manage with her. You get enough of that craziness." He led her away from the house, up through the woods, and the table was left there, incongruous and forlorn, in the middle of the little clearing in the moonlight.

Byrd and Lilias walked up through the trees until they came to the fence to the lower orchard. Here the orchard cut a deep corner out of the wood, and at the angle of the fence there was a large rock, as big as a small shed, with a wide flat top. It was completely surrounded by trees so that it was invisible from even a little distance, and once you had pushed

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through the brush and reached the rock itself it was as though you were cut off from all the world. Although it was only halfway through the wood and divided only by the fence and screen of trees from the orchard, it seemed a wild and lonely place. When they were children, Liliás and Kibby named it High Rock, and found it fearful and mysterious. Coming home from playing in their moss houses, they left the woods before they reached it and cut across through the orchard. Whenever they played there, as they sometimes did, it was with a trembling sense of danger and adventure. It was a splendid place to play, really; it was cut off from the house, and secret; there were ledges like crude steps in the side of the rock and a twisted tree lay along them like a handrail, the sun shone warm on the broad flat top, and there was room for any game with their twig dolls. Aunt Vi would put them up a little lunch if they asked her, and they could picnic there on the warm, smooth rock with a table set out with leaves and flat stones. But it was so quiet there, and the trees were so close and still around them, and the black moist heaps of rotting leaves at the foot of the rock could hide so much, and in the dark holes under the rock itself so many things might live, crouching there quietly in the secret darkness—snakes and skunks and foxes and far more fearsome things. In the middle of their play a panic always seized them, and they gathered up their toys hastily and made for the house, going quickly, silently, close together, on stiff, frightened legs—for it was mysteriously against the rules to run; something dreadful would come after them if they ran. Only when they were close to the safe white palings of the yard could they break into a trot, and squeezing quickly through the gate, latch it behind them. Running away from High Rock was one of Liliás's familiar nightmares.

Coming through the trees and out to High Rock, it seemed strange to Liliás that now it was no longer frightening. Only

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a few years ago, Byrd Lucas and High Rock together would have made a dream too terrifying to be borne.

Byrd went first up the rough stairs and helped her up after him, and they sat side by side on the flat top. Liliias sat on the edge, and she said to Byrd, laughing, "A little while ago I'd never have dared to sit here with my legs hanging over those old black holes."

He said, "A little while ago you wouldn't let me get in ten feet of you without running and squealing like a little pig."

Liliias was startled. That was just what she had been thinking, and it never occurred to her that their thoughts could run together. She never imagined Byrd thinking at all, as though before and after his spoken words his mind rested as inert as his body, shrouded in a sort of warm empty darkness. Now it seemed possible that like hers his mind had a life of its own and had thoughts and feelings, true and important to him, that he did not say.

Byrd put his arm around her and began to make love to her a little, and she submitted to him passively. Her body was so completely ignorant of passion that, once her fears were quieted, it transmitted no feeling to her. She thought dreamily that she would never be afraid of Byrd's touching her again. She remembered how he used to maul her, pinching her and pulling her long hair and shouldering her roughly, following her about to torment her, urged by the perverse attraction her meekness and timidity had for him. And she thought how she would grow sick with terror at any motion his hand made toward her. Now he was being kind to her, as though she were a puppy or a kitten, as though with growing up he had lost his taste for tormenting small, helpless, frightened things and learned to feel a fondness for them. This was the way her father and Laura had caressed her. It was not Byrd's fault that she was not a kitten or puppy, and so cared more for some people than for others;

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she did not blame him because she did not love him like Clyde and Laura and could not really enjoy his stroking.

Sitting on the rock beside her, making love to her a little, Byrd made up his mind to marry Liliás. As a matter of fact, he found her gentle, passive indifference to his touch more chilling than anger or repulsion. Before this he had met only with resistance or coöperation, and had enjoyed them both. But with the girl he married it would be different; he took for granted that he would have a cold wife. He accepted without question the obvious fact that he must marry a virgin, and preferably one with whom he had not "gone very far." This meant that she would be cold, at least to him, for he could not imagine being with a girl without trying to go as far as he could. This prospect did not dismay him; he had been brought up to think of marriage as respectable, and he would never expect from it the pleasures he found elsewhere.

It seemed to him now that the feeling he had for Liliás, protective and palely tender, and in some strange way both slighting and respectful, was exactly what he should feel for a wife. Besides, he and Liliás suited each other. He was easy and friendly with her, and she loved the life on the farm as much as he did. She would fit in with his mother and Hannah and the farm, all the things that made up the satisfactory existence which he wished never to be disturbed. It seemed to him that to marry any other nice girl, a cold girl who had made him keep his distance, would be to marry a dangerous stranger and to render his whole life uncertain. There was no one but Liliás who was nice and yet easy and familiar, with whom everything would be the same. He thought that, if she liked, he would be willing to marry her at once, for she would not really bind him; she would not even interfere with his going back to Lexington next winter if he wished. And in this way he would have marriage off his mind, like a house for his settled years already bought and paid for; and he could enjoy himself without having to think

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of it again. It would be an advantage, too, with other women. He need never waste time on a girl again, for if a girl went around with a married man she could not pretend not to know what he wanted of her, and she could not try to shame him into marriage later on.

Byrd looked at Liliias's smooth dark head against his shoulder. She was a pretty thing, soft and gentle and no more to trouble a man than a timid bitch puppy. He was sure she was just what he wanted. Of course she would not be a useful wife to him, but that was to be expected with a lady. A man ought not to marry a lady unless he could afford a woman to help with the heavier duties of the household, as well as with the more arduous ones of matrimony. He grinned, remembering a talk he had had with Gran'ma when he first began to beau Liliias a little. "A little dried-up piece," Gran'ma called her. "She's no more juice to her than one of these stiff little dry winter flowers." Now Hannah was a different thing altogether!

"Hannah suits me all right," he told her. "But she don't suit me for marrying. She knows that as well as me."

"Well," Gran'ma answered him, drily, "'tain't every man can manage one wife for his bed and another for his butt-hole!"

He grinned now, thinking complacently that if he wanted a wife for show there was nothing to stop him. Liliias was a pretty useless thing, an ornament to pleasure any man, and he could afford her without sacrificing his comfort.

He said, smoothing her arm: "How'd you like to marry me, Liliias? Not right away, maybe—though we could if you wanted to. You like it here, don't you? Somehow you always seem perkier out here than when I see you in the village. Aren't you about fed up with that old house and those old women and all their crazy doings? How'd you like to marry me and be out here all the time?"

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Lilias said, a little startled: "Why, Byrd, I don't know. I never thought about it. I love the farm better than any place in the world, and Aunt Nona and you all better than anyone since Aunt Laura died, but I've never thought about marrying anybody."

"We'd get along fine together," Byrd said. "You just suit me, Lilias. You and I are both crazy about this place, and we'd have us the finest farm anywhere around, and a money-maker too. We'd have a good time together."

"But I'd sort of hate to leave them," Lilias said. "I really do love them and they've been so good to me. I believe they'd miss me."

"Pshaw!" Byrd said. "You've done enough waiting on those old women."

"I love it here," Lilias went on. "But it would seem funny to leave home for good. Do you think everyone out here would want me? I don't believe Gran'ma likes me very much."

"Pshaw!" Byrd said. "We'd have us a good time, Lilias."

"I'd love being here with you all the time," she said. "And Aunt Nona and Uncle Ivy and Hannah and the baby. I'd love to sort of belong here too."

"That's the way to talk!" Byrd said, delighted. "Let's us call it all settled." And he drew her a little closer to him and tried to kiss her. She pulled away from him, frightened at once, and his mouth only brushed her hair.

"She sure is a scary one!" he thought. "But it wouldn't take any more trouble to tame her than a young colt or a scary puppy. I sure wouldn't grudge the time on 'em if I had me a colt or a puppy dog as pretty as Lilias!"

He made no further advances, and after a moment she leaned back against his shoulder confidently.

Byrd was pleased with himself for having gone ahead and settled it. It was always comfortable to have things settled. His family would not be particularly pleased, but they would

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not mind, not even Gran'ma, with her unreasonable partiality for Hannah. Aunt Vi would grumble about some one else to be waited on, and his father would laugh at him and pity him a little, for, though he liked her, he did not think much of Lillas. But then Byrd both laughed at his father and pitied him a little too; it would be a long day before he tied himself up to a high-handed woman like his mother! Nona would shrug her shoulders and say: "Well; you might have done a whole lot worse, I must say!" That was what they would all feel in their hearts. Like him, they would be glad to have it settled. They would never have to wonder again what sort of girl he'd take it in his head to marry and bring home to them.

Lillas said, "I'd like to have my little cats, Absalom and Hittie, if it wouldn't be too much bother, or make too many cats around the house."

"Shucks!" he said. "You needn't worry about that, Lillas!" He laughed. "If Hannah can move in with a baby, I guess you're entitled to a couple of little cats."

Lillas said: "If we get married, I'd have a baby too, I guess. People always do. I don't believe I could ever have as cute a one as Hannah's."

He laughed and flushed, embarrassed. "Ah, pshaw now, Lillas!"

They stayed at High Rock a little longer. It grew cooler and darker as the hot full moon went down, and it seemed suddenly very late. They went back silently through the woods to the house, swinging hands. When they reached the gate, Byrd looked back into the woods and smiled and said, "Well, honey . . ." And she smiled at him. They were neither one great talkers.

Chapter Six

NONA and Hannah took Matty up to her room. Gran'ma stumped up after them and sat down on a chair against the wall while they undressed Matty and bathed her swollen face and got her into bed. It was the first time Gran'ma had been upstairs in years, but she could not let Matty out of her sight just yet. She had no hope of any further communication from the spirit—she had not much faith in spirits without a table to anchor them—but she felt that this evening with them had been her most exciting and successful, even if Matty had spoiled it at the end with her foolishness. Now she wanted to look at Matty and piece the events of the night together in her mind. The processes of her thought were slow and cumbersome and she forgot things quickly. But she meant to remember every detail of these happenings and to settle in her mind exactly what she thought of it all, before she went to bed and put her mind into the treacherous custody of sleep. To look at Matty a little while longer would help her to do this.

She watched the women undress Matty, averting their heads modestly, slipping her clothes down quickly under her nightdress. But Matty was not concerned with them; she submitted herself to their hands like a child, subdued and silent and sniffing a little. Gran'ma thought, "Wouldn't you know the best spirit we ever got hold of would come to her, and she would bolix it!"

Of course, the best story would be that Laura had come back to reproach her sister and had led her to the spot where she had endured her jealous tortures and wrung a confession

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from her. That was a fine story and it was what the others would tell, and she would pretend to believe it. But in her own heart Gran'ma did not believe that Laura had tortured herself about Matty. Gran'ma had always been fond of Laura; she was a sensible woman, with what Gran'ma called juice to her. Although she knew that Laura had thought herself much above any Lucas and would have been shocked and angry to be compared with Hannah Peach, she always classed her in her mind with Hannah and herself. They were all sensible, with juice to them—healthy, comfortable women with handsome fruitful bodies and plenty of good red blood. "No woman like that has any real call to be jealous of a fool," she thought, "whatever carrying-on there was between Matty and Edward Gay—and that was a sight less than Matty would like us to think, I reckon!" A man could fall into any devilment, but she had a strong faith in the ultimate good sense of the body; he could never prefer a sickly, stringy fool to a woman like Laura for long. "It ain't in nature for a woman with all notions and no legs to hold a man," Gran'ma thought.

That was why it made her angry to see Byrd drawn away from Hannah by a girl like Liliias. She could not hold him, any more than a pretty fragile toy could keep a child long from his dinner. "But Hannah deserves marrying," she thought, stubbornly. "A girl like Hannah's not to be had for kitchen love forever. Some sensible man'll snap her up, baby or no baby, and if it's not Byrd Lucas, why, the more fool him!"

Nona suddenly asked, "Where's Byrd and Liliias?"

Gran'ma laughed scornfully from her seat against the wall: "Gone off sparking, I reckon!"

She watched Hannah keenly for any sign of jealousy or hurt, but there was nothing for even her sharp eyes. "A girl like that knows inside her she's got her pick of men," she thought, with a fierce pleasure. "She don't trouble herself

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about Lillas any more than a fly in her milk. She'll lift her out of her life on a spoon's tip without noticing." She added: "And I don't believe Laura Gay ever fretted about a fool like Matty. It ain't in nature for women like Laura and Hannah to fret themselves about the other kind. No cracked little stringy old maid like Matty Flood ever got Laura out of her peaceful grave!"

Matty lay awake after they had gone downstairs. Her room was very light. The full moon was framed in her window, so that when she turned her head she gazed straight into its strange, disturbing brilliance, and it filled the whole room with its pale, wakeful light. The drug Nona had mixed and given her confused her thought, but tonight it did not make her sleep. She moved her head restlessly on the pillow and threw up her arm to shield her eyes from the moon.

She had no clear memory of what had happened. There was only her familiar childish feeling of triumph at having focused everyone's attention on her, which was already beginning to merge into the familiar childish shame that followed upon her outbreaks. To still these qualms and to bring back her feeling of triumphant superiority, she began, as she always did, to go over in her mind her attractions and her success with men. From the beginning she had outshone her sisters and the other little girls in the village. She could remember how Mr. Tom Weems' eye lit up at the sight of her, and her father's, and all the visiting Democrats', when she was just a child. There was Leonard she had taken from Callie right under her nose, and Edward she had divided with Laura, and Willy Peach she had stolen from his jealous common wife. She did not let herself think deeply; it was enough now to remember that she had bested all these women for a time, however things came out in the end. Her mind slid on swiftly to Ralph, who had singled her out for his attentions, and then to the dance at Tabb Springs where one

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after another the young men came up to claim her and whirl her away; and to Byrd Lucas pausing by her chair at the table to call her his best girl and to snuggle his warm, wet, laughing face against her cheek. These thoughts made her proud again and held off for a little while the confusion and regret and shame that threatened to overwhelm her.

Thinking of Byrd, she suddenly remembered what Gran'ma had said—that he and Liliias were out sparking. He and Liliias! Her brain cleared suddenly. It must be very late and Liliias had not come in. For weeks Matty had closed her mind to all the jokes and insinuations about Byrd and Liliias. She clung to the notion that Liliias was still a child and that all of them, Byrd as well, were only teasing her. But if she stayed out like this with him, alone and late at night when everyone else had gone to bed, and the family accepted it without amusement or indignation, it must be serious. He must be really courting her. A wild jealousy seized Matty and shook her so that she sprang out of bed and began to pace up and down the room.

She could not name what she wanted of Byrd Lucas. Perhaps it was only to continue to flatter and make over her, to seem, while she was there, to prefer her to the younger girls. Perhaps in her heart she expected something more. But whatever she wanted of him, she felt now that he had duped and betrayed her.

She hated Liliias. She had stolen her first place with Byrd when she knew that Matty must come before every other woman. She threatened to take it with the rest of the family, too. If Liliias married Byrd Lucas there would be bitter months when all the talk and thought would be of her and Matty would have to take second place.

And, strengthened by the wave of shame and depression that was due presently to submerge her, came the intolerable thought that in spite of everything, her looks, her charm, her

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indefinable superiority to other women; in spite of apparent success and favor, she was to meet defeat again.

When she could stay in her room no longer she slipped down the stairs and sat down on a low step to watch for them. A few nights before she had sat there, weeping with jealousy and anger as she sat now. Then she cried because they had gone off and forgotten her; the three young ones had left her out of their pleasures to sit behind with the old people. But now youth had not overlooked her for one evening only; Byrd and Liliias had deserted her and were shutting her off alone into middle age forever.

She heard them come up on the porch, but they did not come in immediately, and she ran into the parlor and looked through the front window. Just as she saw them, Liliias stepped forward to open the door and Byrd caught her waist and pulled her back against him. Liliias half turned her head and smiled at him, and he nuzzled her cheek with his, and she smiled again and covered his hands with her own. In a moment she unloosed them gently and reached again for the door.

Byrd said, "Ain't you going to even give me a little kiss?" "Of course I will, dear Byrd." And with one hand still on the knob, she put the other on his shoulder and leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Byrd laughed and reached up and touched her throat with his finger tips. "You'll have to learn to do better than that, young lady!"

As Matty watched them, all the disgust and jealousy and prurient suspicions of a good woman who despises her own virtue rose up in her. She felt obscenity like nausea, dark and bitter in her throat.

At her first words Byrd turned hastily and ran down the steps and around the corner of the house. Liliias did not blame him for his desertion. Flight was the only possible thing for anyone, and as soon as she could loose herself from her

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paralysis of astonishment and horror, she ran, too. She still held the door, and she closed it swiftly on Matty's words and on the stirring of the aroused household, and fled into the yard. She stood there trembling while Gran'ma and Nona and Hannah questioned Matty and came to the door and out onto the porch, peering into the darkness. Ivy Lucas came back from his long Saturday evening at the store, leaving the Ford at the stile in readiness for church on Sunday morning and coming up the front path, and scattered them. "There's no getting to the bottom of it tonight," he said. "The thing is to get this one to bed and let the young ones come in when they see fit." He left the front door open behind the screen and turned up the lamp in the hall.

Lilias was afraid of the wood at night and of the long empty road, and when she saw the light go on in Matty's room she crept back to the porch and lay in the swing. After a while she grew cold and cramped and went softly into the house and slept the rest of the night on the parlor sofa.

The next morning Callie ran up the steps, calling out: "Matty! Matty darling! What has happened?" It was the voice of an anxious mother who, provoked but secretly a little pleased, sees that no one but herself can cope with her spoiled child.

This had been her attitude, nicely balanced between apology and reproach, since Nona told her, driving out from church, that Matty had had one of her spells and this morning had locked herself in and would not eat. Callie listened, shaking her head and compressing her lips, and said, finally: "Well, Matty always gets upset away from home. No, no, it's not your fault. I blame myself. I ought to know by this time no one but me can manage Matty." She was silent the rest of the way, sitting forward, clasping and unclasping her pocketbook, sighing deeply now and then, in her impatience to arrive and take matters into her own hands.

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Matty let her in at once. She had composed herself. She had already thought out just what she would say to Callie to put the best face on her own behavior and so to be able, with Callie's approbation, to exorcise the shame that still possessed her.

She told her how upset she had been to wake up and find Liliás still out, and how she had walked up and down the room, unable to go back to sleep, and had finally gone downstairs to wait. Then she described what she had seen on the porch. "I was so horrified I guess I lost control," she said. "Liliás, too! But I wouldn't tell anyone anything about it until you came."

Callie was genuinely shocked and alarmed. She thought of Kibby, and of what people said about Hannah Peach, and she cried: "Oh, my goodness! Why, he wouldn't dare! Do you guess he means to marry her?"

Matty cried: "Oh, Callie! You wouldn't have Liliás marry Byrd Lucas!"

"You don't think anything's already happened, then?"

"Oh no!" Matty said, hastily. "I'm sure of that. Liliás is just a child, in spite of what I saw last night. That's what frightens me. She don't know what she's doing, Callie. It would be worst of all if she did really marry him. Liliás couldn't live with a man like Byrd Lucas, Callie. She'd simply die! Why, she doesn't even know what marriage is!"

Callie motioned to her to be silent. Then she sat down and, leaning back, pressed her fingers on her eyes and drew them down her cheeks in Bess's gesture. She would surely hate to see Liliás married to Byrd Lucas. He was coarse, he was wild, he hadn't even, she thought, scornfully, real good sense. Perhaps Liliás wasn't exactly brilliant, but there was a difference. She was all spirit, Callie thought, gropingly, and Byrd Lucas was all body; that the mind was left out of both of them did not bring them closer. Liliás's stupidity, if that

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was the word, was the continuing innocence of childhood, and Byrd's was the thoughtless unreason of a healthy animal. Besides her fears of what Liliás's life with him would be, this marriage would hurt her pride and spoil the high hopes she had cherished since Liliás's trip to the university. She had vowed then that Liliás should have her chance and be happy, that it should be the beginning of a fuller life than any of them had known. A poor-white Lucas, even if he was Nona's son, a country boy they'd known all his life, who offered her an existence as narrow and colorless as her own had been, was no match for Liliás.

"She'd be dead in a week," Matty went on, eagerly. "Or out of her mind. Liliás is a little girl, not a woman you could turn over to a man like that. She'd never in this world marry him if she knew what it would mean."

"'Sh-h! 'Sh-h!" Callie stopped her. Matty's talk, as true as it might be, shocked and repelled her.

"Well, you wouldn't dare let her go into it without talking to her first!"

"Of course somebody must talk to her beforehand ——"

"Let me!" Matty broke in, flushed and bright-eyed. "Let me tell her, Callie!"

Even Callie felt something revolting in her eager boldness, and sensed something in the situation which she did not understand and which frightened her a little. But she would not dwell on such sensations. She said, firmly: "No, Matty. First I'll see if there's anything serious between her and Byrd Lucas, and then I'll talk to her if I must. It's my duty."

She sought out Liliás and took her into Gran'ma's room where they could be alone. Sitting on the bed, high on the clean gay quilts, and surrounded by the close crowded odors of Gran'ma's room, she held Liliás's hand and begged her to tell her what there was between her and Byrd Lucas. "You must confide in me, my child," she told her. "The people

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who love you can't just sit back and let things go on. After last night, you must confide in me."

It was the sort of scene Liliás dreaded. It brought back vague terrifying memories and emotions she tried to keep locked out of her mind. She felt herself freezing with fear and helplessness and anger, as on those nights when she had waked up to find Bess sitting beside her on the bed, laughing and crying over her, and had drawn away and lain, quivering and silent, pressed against the wall. At last she managed to say, "Byrd wants me to marry him, that's all."

"And you?" Callie urged her.

Liliás moaned softly: "Ah, Aunt Callie. I don't know yet. Maybe so."

Still holding her hands tightly, but looking down now, her cheeks and nose stained with a purplish flush, Callie began to talk to her.

Liliás was fainting with horror, not only at what she heard, but that it should be put into words at all. It was unthinkable that people told one another things like this. If the knowledge had come to her some other way, she could have accepted it in time and forgotten it. Now she could never, she felt, wipe out the terror and disgust of this scene and the words Callie said.

Callie did her best. It was doubly hard for her now when middle age held its gift of peace just beyond her grasp and her body was wracked by its last rebellions. When she had finished speaking she slipped to her knees and drew Liliás down beside her, and with her face buried in the soap and camphor and lint of Gran'ma's quilts she tried to pray.

It was the first time they had prayed together. People like themselves had church on Sunday, and night and morning they performed their personal devotions as privately as any other act of rising and retiring. Religion at odd times and in company was repugnant to them. There was even an

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indecenty about it which Callie and Liliás both felt now, inarticulately but surely; it was too uncontrolled and elemental for them. They could not give themselves up to it any more easily than they could to passion; it was for night and privacy and wordless cries into the darkness. In broad daylight they clung to the well-ordered ritual of their temperate Episcopacy and voiced even their cries of agony in the language of the Prayer Book. Mamma, could she have seen them, would not have known what to make of it; she would have looked on, startled and disturbed, and said, "Tch! tch!" and gone away, shaking her head.

Now both of them were in an anguish of discomfort and embarrassment. They could only kneel stiffly, avoiding each other's touch, while Liliás waited, trembling, for the ordeal to end, and Callie cried confused and futile words into the coverlets: "O Lord . . . this, thy child. . . ."

When she rose, Callie tried to compose herself, smiling painfully, and searched Liliás's face with her wide, harassed gaze: "It was my duty to talk to you, Liliás, as hard as it was for us both. You'll have to settle in your own heart whether you still want to marry him, but you had to be told of this burden all married women have to bear."

To Callie all of womanhood was a burden. She was deeply convinced, without bitterness, that childhood and old age were the only happy times for women. The years between fifteen and fifty were a trial put upon them to be got through, married or single, as best they might. She looked at Liliás's stricken face and forced herself to say, kindly, haltingly: "You mustn't think you're sinful if you do still want to marry Byrd, Liliás. If you love somebody enough, I guess . . . well, anyway, all the married women you know have had to decide this knowingly. Aunt Nona and Aunt Laura—there aren't any better women ——"

"Oh, don't! Don't!" Liliás cried. To make her think of

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real people after what she had just heard—it was too horrible. “I’ll never marry anyone. Never! Never!” If she kept to herself the rest of her life, bathing and putting on fresh clothes every day, withholding her body from every contact, keeping every feeling and thought strict and unshared, she could never be whole and clean again!

She rushed out of the room, and Callie looked after her and sighed: “Well, the good Lord knows. Anyway, I did my best.”

When she went upstairs, Matty was in bed, leaning up on her elbow to watch the door, her face flushed and feverish. “Well?” she said. “Well, Callie?”

Callie went over to the washstand and poured herself a drink of water. Then she shook her head and grimaced as though a bitter taste stayed in her mouth. “She says now she’s never going to get married. But you can’t tell. I guess many a girl’s said that before now.”

“I don’t think Liliás will,” Matty said. She lay back, relaxed, and turned her cheek into her pillow. “Let’s go back home, Callie,” she murmured. “Don’t let’s us go away from home again.” In another minute she was asleep.

Nona drove them into the village that evening, with Liliás in the front seat beside her and Matty and Callie behind. They were all silent. When they reached the house they found that they had to lift Matty out of the car and almost carry her up the stairs. Once again she allowed herself to be undressed and put to bed like a child, and when the moment came for her medicine she held out her arm to Callie without turning her head.

When she was in bed she reached up to them, childishly, confidently, and kissed them good night in turn. She was asleep in an instant, lying quiet and smiling, with her hand against her cheek. She had put herself completely into their hands, to be taken care of for the rest of her life. She had

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made her last try for womanhood and failed, and she would not grow old, so she had gone back to childhood. She would go back to babyhood, almost to the womb. Withdrawn into her quiet, darkened room, into her soft, secret bed, fed and drugged and tended, she would never set herself against them or lift her hand to help herself again.

PART SEVEN

CALLIE

Chapter One

CALLIE came downstairs, freshened up for the afternoon, and sat in a rocker on the porch to wait. She had put on a white dress and recoiled her hair—the marks of the wet comb still showed darkly on its bleached tan—and dappled her face with boric powder which had clotted in the traces of cold cream at her nostrils and at the corners of her mouth and in the three fine lines across her forehead. On one cheek, plain under the film of raw white powder, was the red crease of sleep.

Callie was fifty-six, and her face and figure had lost the fragile sweet-sour girlishness that had clung to her so long, and settled into middle age. Her headaches had left her, too, and the ravaged bareness was gone from her forehead and the dazed bright look of pain from her eyes. Her hair lay in smooth, flat, damp waves across her brow, unruffled by the frantic upthrust of her fingers, and the quivering nerves of her face were overlain with flesh. She had stoutened, and for the first time in her life her haunches spread and cushioned her, so that she filled a chair comfortably and was content to sit and rock and rest. Under her dress, rucked up by her thighs, her legs showed solid and unashamed. There was a look of Laura about her as she sat there. They had been alike as young girls, and now, after so many years, the likeness showed again. Thirty years later, middle age had given Callie the peace and integrity that marriage and motherhood had brought to Laura in her youth.

After so many years of urgent, wasteful restlessness, Callie had discovered a way to use up all her forces. Work and

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worry had been only irritants that inflamed her energies and increased them. Now she consumed herself utterly in sleep and in the functioning of her own body.

In the mornings she rose late, and sat down in her dressing-gown to a long late breakfast. Afterwards she shut herself into the bathroom. This was known to the household as "Callie's time," and no one dreamed of disturbing her there or of usurping her place.

The whole morning went in the prolonged complicated processes of her toilet. She brushed her teeth with a special powder, so many times across and up and down, and then went carefully between each tooth with dental floss. She sprayed her nose and throat and rubbed an oily cream well into her hands. Afterwards she sat before her mirror and waged war on the aridity that threatened her increasingly with the years. She brushed her hair, counting these strokes, too, and oiled it; and then, with her face in a heavy mask of cold cream that must soak in just so many minutes before she wiped it off, she oiled and polished her nails. If she did not do these things, a thin crust of white flaky skin would overlay her scalp and eyebrows, and the skin of her face and throat would be covered with a fine dust and a film of tiny lines, like the surface of dried earth, and her finger nails would spot and crack and splinter off.

When she had dressed, she came downstairs and read the newspapers. If anything came up to disturb her—questions from Milton and Dell, or something to see to about the house, or a caller, or a trip to the store, or a need to discuss with Liliás something about Matty or Mamma—she was in a swivvet immediately. She went about the house then in nervous haste, short-winded, flushed, talking to herself, and sank down exhausted at the dinner table, complaining that she had been too rushed all morning to catch her breath!

She ate dinner leisurely, a long, rich, serious meal, and afterwards she went upstairs and creamed her face and

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brushed her teeth again, and prepared for her nap. She undressed down to her chemise, hanging her outer clothes and her heavy corsets with their intricate laces on separate chairs to air, and flung herself down to sleep. She could give herself up to sleep, completely, voluptuously, as a baby gives itself up to the breast. At half-past four she rose and washed and dusted herself with powder and changed into a fresh white dress, with the red mark of her drugged, motionless sleep printed deeply on her cheek.

At five o'clock she was out on the porch, ready for callers, and in the dark dining-room behind her Liliás moved about, clinking glass and silver, preparing the refreshments for the late afternoon. Some one always came in—Maudie Tidball or Mr. Tom Weems or Nona or Dr. Hugh or Edward and Miss Shaver. Lately there had been Agnes. They sat until supper-time, gossiping and eating and drinking, and then Callie nearly always prevailed on some of them to stay for supper and straight through the evening.

After supper they sat on the porch again, or if there was no company Callie and Liliás played rummy with Mamma. Sometimes, if they were very gay, Callie opened up the piano and they sang the old songs, and Liliás went out into the kitchen for cake and wine or raspberry vinegar, and the festivity might keep them up until after ten. On ordinary nights they were in bed at half-past nine. Callie was always ready to go up. She undressed swiftly in the dark and washed herself hastily and threw herself with a deep sigh of contentment on her bed. "It beats me," she thought, "how anybody can call themselves unhappy when they can stretch out nights in a good bed!"

She always slept well, though not so heavily as in the afternoon, waking toward morning to lie in a delicious languor until Dell rang the gong. As she had never managed to fill the long hours by all her care for others and her frantic

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industry about the house, she now filled every crack and crevice of her day with idleness.

Dell and Milton, whom she had harried and spied on so long, took over the running of the place. Milton planted what he chose in the garden and cultivated it when he liked and brought up what he cared to to the house. Dell came later and later in the morning, until she did not have breakfast on the table until ten o'clock and there was no time for house-cleaning before dinner. When Callie roused herself to reprove them or to give them orders, they said, "Yessum, Miss Callie," without half-listening, with a hidden indulgent insolence, and went their own way. But they were fond of her and of all the family; they owned their white folks, a burdensome luxury, but one which gave them a curious satisfaction. They tyrannized and back-talked and scamped their work, but they made them comfortable. With all the laziness and waste, Matty and Mamma were tended and happy, and there were rich, tasty meals three times a day. In the mornings Dell left her cabin long after the other house servants had gone to their work, laughing: "Well, I got to get me to my four old babies sometime this day!" And late in the day Milton heaved his old, shiftless bones from the comfort of a chair in some one's kitchen. "Got to scratch around in the dirt awhile now, I reckon, so's my ownself and my ladies yonder won't starve."

Although Callie had delegated all her authority to Lilies and to Milton and Dell, the house was never more her own. Delivered from her servitude to it, no longer ordering meals or checking supplies or noting dust, the house belonged to her in the sense that it had belonged to the Captain. The whole establishment was run for her and ordered to her comfort. Milton saw to the yard and garden, and from the porch she need only enjoy the cool thick grass sprinkled with bright flowery weeds, and the glossy alternating green and brown of the vegetable-garden, and the thick flowering or fruit-hung

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bushes of raspberry and blackberry and currant. Dell prepared the dishes she liked and called her to her meals. If the cooking one day was poor, she said, only, "Well, Dell, this is no great shakes of a dinner." Dell would grumble under her breath, some impudence, likely, which she took pains not to hear, and the next day there would be some one of her special favorites on the table.

Lilias presided at meal-time now, coming down the moment the gong rang to overlook the table, and sitting down to wait for them, with the coffee on one hand and the meat-platter on the other, while Callie came in in her own time like a guest. She had choice bits of meat and salad now that she no longer served, and she had leisure at the table to cultivate her little ways. There was the special pepper that must stand in its wooden mill at her place, and the glass of the wine Nona had sent in to her which she drank at dinner every day for the sake of her digestion, and the box of white powders Hugh Tidball gave her to settle her stomach which she took in half a glass of water after meals. With the coffee at breakfast and supper, there was the ritual of her "second cup." It must be just a swallow; anything more than half a cupful had to be poured back, and it must have no cream or sugar in it, depending on the traces of these in the first cup for its flavor. It was difficult to remember this; even Callie found it hard to remember if she poured it out herself, for she took both cream and sugar lavishly at first. But if Lilias forgot, so that a grain of sugar or a drop of cream got in by mistake, Dell must be rung for and the whole thing thrown out, and Callie's second cup was ruined; for the magic residue from the first was destroyed and a clean cup was no good at all. Callie found endless occupation and pleasure in this ritual which she evolved for herself and the household and added to from year to year; so that in time her whole life would be lived by an unalterable routine, every moment of her day to be played out by set intricate rules like a game of chess,

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and her every thought taken up by the need to see that not a move was missed or forgotten.

Callie sat out on the porch and rocked, scratching her hands, on which now and then broke out a scattering rash like poison ivy that came and went and was, she said, the tag end of her nerves.

A somnolence was over all the house. Dell drowsed in the kitchen in the rocker she had padded with flat pillows made of scraps of old cloth and rags. Upstairs, in the cool darkened front room, Matty murmured and laughed and whimpered in her half-sleep. In the breezy back room Mamma lay outside the covers on her bed, the late sunshine falling on her small round black figure and neat gray hair, resting so lightly, for all her plumpness, that the spread was scarcely wrinkled and not a strand of her smooth hair disturbed. A knitted shawl was thrown over her legs to conceal them—for she could never sprawl immodestly with half her belongings, as she said, on public show—and to protect them from the summer breeze. In her little hall room, shadowed to a watery green twilight by the walnut tree outside the window, Lillas began to wake. She stirred in her damp nightdress under the sheet on the bed stripped for a hot night. She had not yet got up, and the tray Callie brought her at dinner-time stood untouched on the floor by the bed. She had gone to a dance at Tabb Springs with the Gay twins and Hannah and Byrd Lucas, and in the middle of the evening Ivy had telephoned them to come home, to stay with Gran'ma, who had taken a turn for the worse, while he went into the village to get Nona and the doctor. Lillas had waited to help Hannah until they got back, and it was nearly morning before Dr. Hugh took her home with him in his car.

Out on the porch Callie fretted a little, thinking that for the first time since she could remember no one had gone for the afternoon mail, and that in a little while she would have to go inside herself to fix the refreshments. She had just taken

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a nap and completed her careful toilet, and it seemed too much for life to demand any further effort from her this afternoon. In the old days she would have seized at once on Liliás's defection, and nervous and scolding and yet half pleased to be able to complain that these afternoon duties, along with everything else, had been left to her, she would have attended to everything herself. She would not have waited a moment past the usual time to put on her hat and go herself for the mail, and then have gone at once to the arrangement of the tray, hurrying a little for fear that Liliás might come in time, after all, to disappoint her of her grievance. But now, after fretting futilely for a minute without stirring from her comfortable chair, she made up her mind to let the mail go until morning, and to wait and see if Liliás would not wake up in time to get downstairs before the callers came. To settle herself, she took out her hairpins and shook out her hair, feeling a delicious relaxing of her taut nerves as it fell loose around her shoulders; and then she fastened it up again in a firmer coil, thrusting the pins in carefully, each one in its own place.

She looked up from rearranging her hair and saw Agnes trotting toward her on her high heels, dressed in a stylish white dress and coat and one of the innumerable close little hats she had in every color, all of which looked just alike to her. Agnes waved to her gaily and smiled her practiced, animated smile—once when she saw Callie looking at her, and again when she turned into the gate. She settled herself in a chair by Callie on the porch, brisk and business-like, laying her bag and gloves beside her on the floor, throwing back her smart loose coat, touching the pearls in her small bared ears, crossing her handsome legs high, and lighting a cigarette.

"Well!" she said. "They've all gone. I got the last one off today. In the nick of time, too! One more day and I'd have had to change the flowers all over the house, and two or three more and my fine garden would have showed itself up

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for the fraud it was! But the whole place did look too lovely up to the very last. The garden might have been there a hundred years, and it's marvelous the effects you can get with Venetian blinds and bowls of flowers and lots of bare floor space in one of these old houses. Lord knows, bare floors was just about all Edward Gay left me! If I'd come down much later I'd have found them torn up and the boards sold for liquor!"

Agnes had come down the summer before and rented Gays Park for a girls' school. The idea came to her one morning in New York, and the next day she was going home for the first time since Laura's wedding, thirty years before. She got off the train at Melford and went directly to the Ford Agency on Main Street. "I'm thinking of buying a coupé," she said. "I'd like a demonstration." Once in the car, she told the astonished man to drive her over to the village and to stop by the station first to pick up her bags.

At the top of the long hill she stopped him and looked around her. "Well, I'll be damned!" she said, softly, seeing the ruin.

All that was left of Gays Park was the square yellow brick house set in the midst of weeds and dust, marked off from the road by an old white fence two-thirds broken down. The lawn was gone, the garden was gone, even the beautiful old trees along the drive Edward Gay had cut down and sold. Only a great shaggy honeysuckle vine on one side, and three old apple trees on the other, growing close against the wall, touched the dead gaunt house with fresh green. Agnes saw that only the bare brittle bones of the place were left to her, and she wondered at herself for being able to see their beauty.

In the summer the sun shone full on the naked house and licked it like a flame: the paint on the bricks blistered and peeled, the shutterless windows blazed, the ground all about was baked brown and lifeless. Edward Gay and the boys went out quickly; even before noon the warped boards of the

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porch burned their feet through their shoes. At night they came back, one by one, and went into the north parlor, which was always damp and cool, and slept there naked on mattresses on the floor.

In winter the wind and rain lashed the house, with nothing on any side to break its force, and it was bitterly cold. Ted and Ran, when they were little boys, lay close together in the middle of the bed with their clothes spread on top of the covers. Later on, when they were farther away from woman's training, they slept with their clothes on and were warm at night. Edward Gay lay alone in his own room, too full of alcohol to feel the cold.

The twins began to steal his liquor when they were twelve. Callie had strapped them, the tears running down her closed angry face, when they came to supper and she smelled it on their breath. Edward tried, too, to cure them of the taste for it by beatings; but now that they were nineteen he stole theirs. They delivered small orders of corn for Byrd Lucas to the dances in Melford and other near-by towns and managed to make a little on the transaction for themselves. They got liquor from Byrd on credit and sold it drink by drink to men driving through the village, and the profit paid for what they kept for themselves. Together they talked of beating their father up when he found where they had hidden it and stole it from them.

"That's the second time this month, damn the old man's lousy skin!"

"The cheap bum!"

"I'd like to sweat it out of him with a whip like he did with us!"

But face to face with him they were always defeated by Edward's cool, mocking contempt for them. He beat them when they stole from him, drink or money or food or clothing; but everything else he regarded with indifference. When they began to stay away from school and Callie expostulated

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with him, he said: "What's the good of schooling for louts like mine? They'll be happier and better off without it."

Curiously, the boys went back to school, to spite him or to try to show him that they were better than he supposed. No one knew which, and no one wasted time thinking of it. Only Liliias had some notion of their struggle, embittered by hate and helplessness and the indifference of all around them. When Callie flung up her hands and cried that they were rotten through and through and no hope for them, she would say:

"I don't know. There's something. Someways they try hard to keep decent."

"Foot!" Callie cried. "They're Edward and his father and the whole line of wild, trifling Gays pure and unadulterated—come to a fit end at last! I'm thankful Laura didn't live to see the day!"

The year before, they finished high school and went to their father with a queer, bold innocence, expecting him, somehow, to be proud of them at last, and asked to go to the University. In the years it had been back of their minds to spite him and to show him by making something of themselves, it had never occurred to them he could refuse them. "If you really crave to raise yourselves up," Edward said, with his devilish understanding of their thought, "I'll send you to Middleburg, to the business school of the Christian Brothers, and do my part to turn you into honest clerks."

The boys were wild. They wrote to the authorities at the University, but there were no scholarships for ordinary boys like themselves from a high school in a poor village, with nothing to offer in athletics or scholarship, and in these times there were no jobs for them. There was not even a place they could tend the furnace and yard and help with the house chores in return for their board. All such possibilities had been canvassed and listed by the University long ago, to be given to students more deserving than themselves.

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Edward stuck to his decision: "There'll be no more playing gentlemen for the Gays! If they're too good to learn clerking and accounting so they can work like plain honest men, let 'em go! Let 'em eat dirt and come up from it if they can." He insisted: "I'm doing them a favor, and one they'll thank me for some day. Don't talk to me about the obligations of birth and a good name. That kind of pride is a mistress that'll use up a man's substance all his days and never do a hand's lick for him in return. The stock's worn out, the blood's gone bad, and the name means nothing to anyone any more. Let 'em learn a good trade and marry a good broad-beamed common girl and leave their children to build themselves up into gentlemen with their own sweat if they can. That's the only hope there is left for Gays!" No one knew whether he was mocking or serious, whether it was true conviction or the strange warped hatred he seemed to feel for his sons that upheld him; but he would not be moved.

The boys seemed to have resigned themselves this past winter, going in as small fry with Byrd Lucas and Willy Peach and the Swopes in their liquor business. But they still had an ugly look about them. The men said to each other now and then: "Edward Gay better watch himself with his goading, alone with those two young ones in that old house and the three of them half the time blind drunk"

Agnes finished her inspection of the outside of the house, and told the man driving the car to wait while she went inside. There was no one at home and she walked all around the grounds and through the house, noting quickly and accurately all the possibilities of the place and its disadvantages and weighing them in the cold practiced balance of her mind.

A craze for antiques had swept the country these last years, and Northern tourists on the South Post Road ransacked the shops and houses along the way. Melford had got a

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name for being a place to pick up fine old furniture, and there was always a market there for what the farmers round about called stuff and worthless junk. Most of them were too indolent to take their old things into town for the poor price they got there, but Edward Gay stripped his house bare. He sold the furniture and had begun to tear out mantels and paneling, demolishing the place with a bitter satisfaction. "Corpse-robbing," he called it. "I hope to God the body lasts out my time!"

Agnes saw at once what had gone on, and that it was a question whether she had come in time. She saw the beauties that had not yet been ruined by vandalism and neglect; and where destruction had gone too far she saw quickly if it could be made good or covered up. In half an hour she had weighed matters and made her plans.

She walked out to the salesman waiting in the car, taking her pen and checkbook from her bag as she came. "Very well. I've finished with you. I'll pay for the car and take it now."

"Why, I can't sell it to you like this, ma'am!" he blustered. "There's a pile of things to be attended to first. Why, I don't even know as I can sell you this particular car at all!"

She hushed him. "Nonsense! I want this car and I want it at once, not to sit around waiting while you hunt me up another that won't suit me any better than this. If I'm willing to take one that's stood around the shop goodness knows how long, and been demonstrated over these filthy roads, that's my affair—and it's for you to be thankful. Now I'll pay you for it and take it here and now, or the deal is off. I dare say I can pick one up around here second hand."

The young man endeavored to compromise: "I can't just hand it over to you like this, ma'am. I'll drive back in it and fix it all up with the boss and send it over tomorrow by another man. There's the papers to sign, you know, and licenses."

"I'll take my chance on licenses sooner than be fobbed

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off with some tale if I once let you take this car back. As for your getting home, there is a freight that goes through here at night—I don't doubt you could ride into Melford on it, if you don't see some one going into town who'll take you. There is a perfectly good hotel. You can sit on the porch and watch the road for cars going by. Or let your company send over here for you, along with any papers they want me to sign."

The young salesman said, weakly, that he'd have to talk to the office.

"There'll be a telephone in one of the stores," Agnes said. "Get in and I'll drive you down."

She dropped him at the curb between the drug store and Lucas's, and turned the car, calling back to him, "You'll see me parked down the street when you come out."

On the porch of the Flood house Callie was sitting, just as she sat this afternoon, and with her Mamma and Lilies and Maudie Tidball. Agnes, coming toward them, met their stare with her practiced smile, and waved her hand gaily: "Hello! I'm Agnes!" She called each of them by name, even Maude, after an instant's thought, and she kissed Mamma's cool, flaccid cheek and said, "Hello, my sweet!" "I've come back," she said to them at once, "to turn that old torn-down scandal of a Gays Park into a girls' school. The idea just came to me when I needed something to do and some scheme that would make me a little money. It'll be small and select and strictly of the old-Colonial-South, and paralyzingly swell. And I'll need all your help to make a go of it!"

No one knew yet how she had managed it, but inside of a week she had John Hack up from Norfolk and Edward and the twins moved into the Office and the work begun on the house. She wired John Hack that first evening, asking him to come at once; and he came, whom they had not seen since their childhood, who had not been able to get

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away for the Captain's funeral or for Laura's wedding, who had come to seem so remote from their lives, except for help or advice, that they had not even thought of asking him to Laura's funeral, any more than a bank or a lawyer. It was a shock to them to see him, for they had made a grand figure of him in their minds, a rich, powerful man to whom nothing was impossible; and he was so unimpressive in the flesh, small and almost shabby and somehow pitiable.

Agnes showed him everything and asked him about the working out of all her plans. She listened carefully to his cautious, shrewd advice, balancing it with her own confident opinions and sometimes accepting and sometimes rejecting it, but never ignoring his judgment. Still, she made no secret of the fact that she had got him there to borrow money.

"I'll need a couple of thousand," she said. "It's a good thing. You'll get it back, and thank me for letting you in on it, besides."

"I reckon I can accommodate you," he said. "I won't grudge it to you, goodness knows, if I can."

"Nonsense!" Agnes said, laughing and patting his arm. "A business man like you can always manage a good thing."

She insisted on giving him a note for the money. "It's best to be business-like," she said. "Haven't I always paid you back?"

He thrust the note in his pocket. "Nearly always," he said, slyly, mild and humorous.

Agnes's brow wrinkled. "Do I owe you money for any of my schemes? No, no. You've got to tell me."

"I was only teasing you," he said.

"That won't do!" She pinned him down.

"Well," he said, "there was the shop in—where was it? Newport?—that was going to be such a good thing."

"And so it was!" she cried, eagerly. "I cleaned up on that nicely. It made a good profit the first year, and the second, when the novelty had worn off a little and I wasn't quite

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so sure of it, I sold it to the Junior League. I got a good price for it, and a pleasant little bit of social prominence, for they were grateful. You always get more gratitude for the right sort of business deal than you do for charity!" She paused a moment and cried: "Do you mean to say I never paid you back the thousand you lent me for that? Why, it was the most shameful negligence on my part—unforgivable! I simply never thought of it; feeble as it sounds, you must believe that! Well, we shall have to set that right at once."

She insisted on his subtracting the thousand dollars from the money he had promised to lend her this time. "No, no! I won't do my poor good little uncle an injustice a moment longer! You shall just lend me two thousand and keep my note for three!"

John Hack was as pleased with her and grateful as if she had really paid his money back, with the interest and profit that was due him besides.

The Floods were all relieved when he went home. They had depended on him so many years that they must go on believing him rich and omnipotent, and having him there with them shook their faith. He would talk about things, too, that they never thought of and that were better left unsaid.

Years ago Mamma had turned over the mortgage on the house to him to handle for them. That way they did not think of his paying interest on it or negotiating for renewals; there was no question of money, it was just that now Uncle John Hack handled that for them. They had forgotten about it long ago. But one day he spoke of their apartment, and Agnes cried:

"What! You're not in the old house on Cameron Street?"

And he said: "No. We gave that up. I never got around to paying for it, and when the boys had their own homes and you left us, it seemed more sensible to give it up." He laughed. "I can remember how angry Helen was at first.

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She thought if I hadn't had your mortgage to see to I could have paid for our house. Not that the bit of money I spent on that would have made a mite of difference, but you can't make women see reason about things like that. Well, she's glad enough now to have that big place off her hands and a couple of rooms she can see to herself."

Mamma would have preferred to let the subject drop, but she could not resist a scandalized, "See to herself?"

"Yes," her brother said, cheerfully. "Helen can manage to do for just the two of us. She comes from Philadelphia, you know. Up that way women don't feel the way ours do about keeping a servant, if they can manage by themselves."

"Well!" Mamma said. "I must say! Though I dare say everything's different up there, even children's duty to their parents. You would think, though, one of the boys, one of her own sons ——"

"They've their own families," John Hack said, mildly. "But Helen's got no cause for complaint, nor does she, to do her justice. I do all for her I can and we're comfortable enough by ourselves."

"Their own families indeed!" Mamma sniffed, stirred out of her usual unconcern by this threatening of the structure of her world. "A pretty thing if the young are to come before the old!"

There was even worse than this. *

One day he drew his chair confidentially close to Callie and Mamma. "You know, there's something I want to tell you. Something I've always been kind of ashamed of in my heart, though Lord knows it wasn't my conscious fault. Bess wrote to me that time before she died. It was a funny kind of letter. I couldn't make head or tail of it at the time, but I knew she was in some sort of trouble and I wanted to go out to her. Business was bad then and money tight. We didn't have a penny to spare, with Bob in college and the two older boys in business and needing all the help I

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could spare. Helen wasn't too well. We still had the big house and it was the first year she'd tried to get along without a regular maid. We just had a girl in for cleaning and ironing, I remember, and we talked about having to give her up for a time. Well, I showed Helen the letter, like a fool, I guess, but I thought she might unravel it for me and get down to what Bess really meant under all the tangled, mixed-up words. 'She wants money, that's all,' Helen said. 'If you let her get it out of you at a time like this, you've seen the end of me. I'm tired of being squeezed and sacrificed,' she said, kind of hysterical, for she wasn't well. 'If you send her a penny, I'm though!' I tried to reason with her, to at least let me go out and see what was wrong; for it seemed to me it was my duty to do that much. But she only said that train trips cost money, too, and that if I went I'd never see her again. I shouldn't have given 'way to her, but she scared me, and besides, money was terribly scarce with us then. If I'd only known what was wrong, I'd have gone, anyway, but, you see, I couldn't even make her letter out. When I heard she was dead, it was a blow to me. I've never gotten over it. It was a judgment, it seemed, for the only time I'd made an excuse for not doing what I felt was right. That's why I always want to do what I can for you and for Agnes. I vowed I'd never refuse help to my own again, outright, or just by letting it slide, like I did with poor Bess. Even my dear wife couldn't turn me out of the way of my duty again."

It was a relief to the ladies when Agnes finished with him and he went.

Agnes did wonders with the house, sparing none of them, nor herself. She planned cannily, utilizing the cheap, honest, expert labor of the countryside. She asked everyone: "Who shall I see about painting?" "Who shall I get for carpenter?" "Who'll be the best to fix up the grounds?" Workmen came over from Melford to put in the bathrooms and the

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Delco lights upstairs ("Downstairs," Agnes said, "I'll have only candles and maybe a few fine old lamps if I can unearth them"), and the farm and village labor did the rest.

Agnes drove out in her little Ford coupé every day to look for old furniture and any oddments she could use. She went poking into all the farms and out-of-the-way villages for miles around, even into the negro cabins, and came home late in the evening with her loot. She picked up everything—old pots and pans and door knockers, lamps and candlesticks, pictures and rugs and quilts, old china and glass, even old nails and hinges. She commandeered Byrd Lucas's truck for the larger things, and Byrd drove her to the spots she had already marked in her mind, and back, laden with chairs and sofas and tables and bedsteads and even old stoves, the truck piled high and himself sweaty and grimy with the labor of carrying out and loading all the stuff, and Agnes sitting small and erect and smartly groomed beside him.

The outside of the house was the most difficult problem. Agnes had the roof fixed and shutters for the windows copied from old ones she had found, and the beautiful old porch repaired and painted, and the doors repainted and rehung. But she did not dare touch the peeling brick, knowing that, bad as it was, it would be worse slick and new. She lamented that there were no vines to cover it, except the great honeysuckle on one side, and she went to great pains to train the newer branches around to the front, and she planted an offshoot from it at the front on the other side, hearing that it was a quick-growing vine and one that would go far by the next spring if it got foothold before winter, and seeing for herself that it was old-fashioned and quaint. This in spite of their telling her that honeysuckle was a fence and kitchen and cabin vine and never known on the front of great houses. The honeysuckle and the fruit trees and an old grape arbor were all Edward had left her to work with. She made the best of them, contenting herself with

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making the lawn smooth and bare and green like a city park, with bought boxwoods she scoured the county for on each side of the steps, and transplanted laurel massed at the gate and along the drive. She put out no new trees, saying that that would give a newness and rawness to the place that she must at all hazards avoid, but she transplanted where she could, and set out lilacs and flowering bushes all along the fence on the road. She made her garden to the side of the house, around the arbor and the three old apple trees, planting quick-climbing roses by the fences, so close together that they would choke one another out in a little while, and consulting with Nona about easy flowers. She wanted great masses of them that could be planted now or in the spring, all of them to bloom in early June. "I don't care if there's not a leaf or blossom after the middle of June," she said. "I want a magnificent jumbled old-fashioned garden for my parents to see at the end of school." Nona, born and bred to a summer-long garden where flowers followed one another in blooming from spring to fall, was somehow scandalized. But Agnes knew exactly what she wanted. She would not hear of wasting a cent on the bulbs and the tender short-lived flowers of early spring, or on those that did not give their fullest bloom until midsummer. "Everything must bloom the first two weeks in June," she said. "And I want the garden packed with blossoms, not a bare inch for earlier or later flowers."

"Why, that's not a real garden at all," Nona said. "It'll be a brown burned-out desert by July!"

"I know," Agnes smiled. "It's not supposed to be a garden. Like all the rest, it's to be a stunning sham. It's just part of my façade."

Callie was dubious at first about the success of the school. It seemed to her that with all the poor talk in the newspapers lately, this was a bad time to start anything, let alone an unnecessary luxury like a private school.

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Agnes brushed her arguments aside. "It's the best time in the world. I know quantities of people in New York who are sick over the expense of a good school, but who wouldn't dare to send their children to a cheaper one up there. But a new school, started by a friend, in an old Southern mansion dating back to Colonial days and still in the same family, the teachers all bona-fide F.F.V.'s—for I shall have nothing but real ladies picked up cheap. There's a job for all of you if you like—and all sorts of atmosphere, and exclusive, and cheap enough to save them money, besides! Why, I could fill it twice over! But I shan't try for more than, say, eight or ten girls at first; that's as much as I can manage until I'm really organized, and that would pay me nicely at a thousand or twelve hundred a year."

The ladies could not believe their ears. It was not possible that even Agnes could find people willing to throw away any such sum upon their children. But Agnes laughed at them. She had a great many rich friends. After her husband died, and even before, she had lived largely by her wits, having found from the first that Navy pay and pensions were inadequate for her needs. She took wealthy people to Europe, and decorated their houses for them, and shopped for them, and sent them to stores where she received a commission on everything they bought for themselves. She visited interminably, and when she was not visiting she had always some house or apartment at her disposal, taking care of apartments when their owners were in Europe or Florida or California, of town houses when people were in the country, and of country places when they were in town. She exploited every social possibility open to her. She was in the Southern Society and the Colonial Dames and the Social Register, exploiting them astutely for the benefit of rich acquaintances naïve enough to be impressed, and laughing at them a little with those who took them for granted.

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She made herself useful and charming, and she never neglected the small rare courtesies that cost her nothing. Her telephone calls, her little notes, her few carefully chosen flowers arriving at just the appropriate moment, her odd, worthless little gifts picked up in Europe—the sort of thing, her friends said, that no one but Agnes ever seemed to find—had brought her far more than other people's lavish generousities. She had a genius for turning the people who did favors for her into obligated and grateful friends. She would write to some of these, telling them gaily and casually about the school she planned, making them indulgent partners in one more of her amusing, clever, faintly fraudulent schemes, and it would be no trouble at all for them to find for her the number of girls she wished.

The first winter had passed successfully. The parents who came down to look at the school had been charmed with Gays Park; and the bare floors, and the candles and lamps, the stoves and open fireplaces that had spared Agnes so much expense, were acclaimed as a brilliant preservation of Old-World atmosphere. The girls had been moderately contented, too. She fed them well and gave them all the freedom she dared for Melford and the movies. She made a feature of informal "country" dances every Saturday night, and invited the innocuous slicked-up boys from all over the county. Byrd Lucas and the Gay twins, flattered and threatened and bribed into good behavior, taught riding and came over for tennis in the spring and fall.

"Oh, I've made a pretty good thing of it," Agnes now said, contentedly. "I don't suppose it'll last—or that I will. But it ought to pay very well before I have to go bankrupt and flee from my debts."

Maudie Tidball, who had come over the moment she saw Agnes on the porch, gasped delightedly. "Why, Agnes! You mean you'd actually run off if it suited you, and with money in your pocket, too!"

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"I should indeed!" Agnes said, laughing. "I'll tell you an infallible rule for business success—pocket your profits and run away from your debts."

"Have you ever run away, truly?" Maudie Tidball, huge and infantile, with her soft face and her round cropped head and her dimpled neck and arms, like an immense small girl, stared at Agnes, fascinated.

"I certainly have! I'm like an Indian. Moving into new country and wearing out the land and moving on again." Agnes looked at them, twinkling, and they smiled back at her.

The chief part of Agnes's charm lay in the fact that she did not save it for people likely to be useful, but practiced with it constantly. She worked quite as hard to captivate the people she happened to be with as the richest of her acquaintances. The only difference was that she forgot the former the instant they were out of her sight. The ladies never became accustomed to the pains Agnes took to interest and entertain them. To talk to Agnes was always to be a guest at a party of which she was the hostess. Everyone in the village, and Mamma and Callie and Lilies, even Milton and Dell, thought she was the most fascinating person they had ever seen. What charmed them most was her assumption that they were all as bad as she was. When she talked, it was with the understanding that her hearers were as gaily calculating and opportunist as herself. It gave Callie and Maude Tidball and even Nona a delicious thrill of wickedness to hear her, and a curiously pleasant sensation, compounded of shock and amusement and relief: there was no use pretending to any of the disinterested virtues around Agnes!

"Where are your children, Agnes?" Callie asked her one day soon after she came, and everyone listened eagerly, for she had never once mentioned them since her arrival.

"My steps, you mean? I was far too sensible ever to have any of my own! Why, they're nicely married and very fond

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of me. I often visit them, but not so often that they get over being glad to see me. I make them beg me, for to tell the truth they bore me a little, they're so good and reasonable and anxious to comfort my old age. I always treated them well enough to hold their affection, but never well enough to be imposed on, and married them off as quickly as possible. Not so well that they could snub me afterwards, but quite well enough for them to feel grateful. I stay with them and their satisfactory husbands whenever I'm in a tight place."

She would say: "You pretend to disapprove of me, but you know we're all frauds together. It's the grand old tradition of Southern womanhood. Be born female and a lady and the world owes you a living. We all go on that principle—the only difference is that you all are content with a living and I've introduced the Yankee notion of profits. That's why I sometimes have to run away"

It was almost time to serve the refreshments. Mr. Tom Weems would be stopping by on his way home from the bank in a little while. Callie saw Maude and Agnes glancing toward the door; all of them looked forward to the little break in the afternoon, to the sight of Liliias coming out with a plate of sandwiches and the tall cool glasses on a tray. She listened, and to her relief she heard Liliias stirring about in the house and she thought that she had been wise not to disturb herself, after all. Then she remembered that the ice had not come. "Mercy!" she thought, distractedly. "This has been a day!"

Byrd Lucas delivered ice in his truck three days a week, and all of them wondered how they had ever got along without it. Byrd had bought the old ice plant outside of Melford soon after he and the Swope boys and Willie Peach went into the regular business of making corn whisky and running it into town. It was remarkable what enterprises it had led to. He bought trucks, and then the ice plant. "It's only in

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nature, as Gran'ma would say," he said, "for a dairy farmer and bootlegger both to supply his customers with ice." Now he was talking of building a cider-mill right by the orchard instead of shipping the apples through a broker. There was a sharp demand for apple vinegar and cider these days, and an easy thing to slip a couple of kegs of hard in with every carload. If he did this, he said, he would give the Gay twins steady jobs, and Heaven knew that would be a mercy. Callie thought: "He must be almost as well off as Ivy now. It's a wonder the business prohibition's opened up, and the money it's brought in hereabouts, and the way it's settled the young men down to work!"

She saw Milton coming down the street, and called to him: "Have you seen Mr. Byrd and his ice-truck anywheres about?"

Milton chuckled. "Won't be no ice today! I heerd Mr. Byrd was over in Melford, locked up in jail!"

Agnes and Maude Tidball both cried out with Callie, "What on earth!"

Milton came in the gate and cut across the side yard to the garden. "That's all I know. Miss Nona's down the street. I guess she'll be by to tell you all what's happened."

Nona drove up and got out of the car and they seized on her, rising from their places and crying out again: "Nona! What on earth!"

Nona began to laugh. "Yes, it's true. The rascal was in jail sure enough, though I guess he's out again by now. I wouldn't be surprised if he was round as usual with his ice, bursting to tell how he managed to get himself out. But he was in jail in Melford this morning, and what's more, it was me put him there!"

She told them the story, laughing so much that she could scarcely talk and they had to interrupt her over and over again: "Nona! For pity's sake! We can't make out a word you say!"

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Last night Byrd and the Swope boys had taken two trucks and driven over towards Melford. It was a big load of corn to be picked up by some outside bootleggers on the far side of town. For some reason these men were scary about getting it through the town themselves and the boys were to bring it over and wait for them down the road at a spot they named. Byrd didn't leave until after dark, and it was Wednesday night, the busiest night of the week except Saturday, so Ivy was at the store. Aunt Vi felt poorly and went up to bed and Hannah was busy with Gran'ma, so Nona had the porch and parlor to herself and it was like being alone in the house. "I didn't have a thing to do but wait and worry," she said. "And I got my craw full of both!"

Finally the telephone rang and she ran to answer it, and it was Ivy saying he was late and would spend the night in at the hotel. She went to bed then, too nervous to stay up waiting any longer, and woke up about three o'clock and found that Byrd had not come in. She was scared to death, she said. She remembered everything she had ever read in the paper about hijackers and gangs and racketeers, and in a little while she saw them all dead by the roadside, while the bootleggers made off for the state line with liquor, and trucks, besides. She got up and went downstairs and called up Ivy. He was as mad as hops at being waked up, and wouldn't even listen to her, much less lift his hand. She was nearly frantic. Then a thought came to her. She called up Melford and asked the operator there for the number of a man named Jim Heeny or Hogan or some such Irish sound. Here Nona began to laugh again: "I didn't know his right name, but I knew who he was and I got hold of him. 'Mr. Heenan,' I said, 'I'm Mrs. Lucas. You don't know me, I reckon, but my son and two other boys are in some God-forsaken spot outside of Melford with two trucks of liquor to hand over to some big rum-running gang—that is, if they're not all lying in their own blood by this time. Alive

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or dead, you ought to find 'em just off the road in that little wooded tract about five miles out. You'd surely relieve a mother's mind if you'd go out and look for 'em there.' 'Yes, mam. I'll do that indeed,' he said, polite and pleased as punch; nothing mad about him at being waked up at three in the morning. I had to laugh! 'You can rest easy that I'll go after them this minute and do my best to bring 'em in,' he said. Lord-a-mercy! I nearly split my sides! Who he was? Why, that agent down from Washington, of course, the one who talked so big about cleaning up the district! He found them, all right, still waiting there, and just in the nick of time. For there was a big truck coming the other way, running blind, that turned and whizzed off down the road when it saw his car. Of course he towed them off to jail, but jail's better than an untimely grave, at least to my mind! It'll be a lesson to them to stick to their own business and not go running after a lot of thieves and cut-throats and Lord knows who for a little extra profit. Byrd and his talk of expanding! I just hope this will be a lesson to him!"

She was still adding to the story when Byrd drove up with the ice. "How'd you manage to get out so soon?" they called to him.

"Oh, I had one of my fits, and after that they couldn't wait to take my bail!" He carried the ice around to the kitchen, and they heard his careless talk and loud empty laughter with Dell and Milton at the back.

When Liliás would not marry him, Byrd had been not so much unhappy as restless and unsettled. It was a strange thing for him to have his plans upset and to be balked of even such a mild desire. When fall came he did not go back to Lexington, but up to New York with Paul Swope and two Melford boys to work for the Standard Oil. They were experimenting with tetra-ethyl gas at their New Jersey plant, and the young men were lured by the talk of high wages and easy hours and the prospect of a job away from home. They

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took an apartment together in New York and had the time of their lives for a few months until the gas-poisoning got them. One of the Melford boys died and they were all badly poisoned. For almost a year Byrd was in a sanitarium, out of his head a good part of the time, and taking a couple of strong men to hold him down when his worst spells were on him.

He came home at the end of a year, but it was three before he was really well, and the doctors said his lungs would never be right again. But he did not regret it. He had had him a fine winter in New York, and the Standard Oil had paid his hospital bills and still sent him a pay check every month. The lawyer the men had fixed it up that he was to draw compensation as long as he was unable to work. Every so often he went up to New York to let the company doctors look him over, and when he had a bad spell now he went up to Walter Reed and bummed a few weeks off the Government. He always managed to enjoy himself, and the trips made a welcome break in the country life. His check from the Standard Oil had come to be, with his Government money, one of the prime satisfactions of his existence. It was a point of honor with him to burn it up. "Come on," he would say. "Let's have us a good party on the Standard Oil." Or on the Government. Sometimes a soberer thought struck him and he would add, gravely: "Thanks to the two of 'em, I'm let out of bread-and-butter worries for the balance of my life!"

Callie asked, "Does Byrd have his bad fits often now, Nona?"

"Now and then," Nona answered, negligently. "Mostly when it suits him to, I suspect. They're sometimes mighty convenient."

Miss Shaver came across the road from the hotel and joined the ladies on the porch. She was still a pretty woman, with her lacquered black hair freshly waved and her thin

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mouth reddened and her stylish trim figure in a white sports dress. But there was something dried out about her. Her waved hair was too hard and set, her fine skin was too whitely powdered and stretched too tightly over the sharp, delicate bones, so that there were shadowy hollows in her cheeks and under her lip and on her forehead at the temples and between her plucked brows. All her jaunty movements were too brisk and brittle. She had jelled hard and shrunk a little in the fine mold of her youth.

The ladies took Edward's affair with her for granted now and no longer held it against her. The years had rendered it flavorless and respectable, and the sight of them together was merely a commonplace of life in the village. They no longer disapproved of her and she no longer defied them, but there was still a curious antagonism between her and the older women. They were relaxed and softened, given up contentedly to middle age, while her flesh was still braced against it. She looked at Agnes, imperious and handsome with her corseted figure and her smart gray hair, wringing the last possible advantage from her middle years, and thought: "I could have looked like her if I'd had the sense to marry and spare myself. But she's the only one of 'em all I'd change with. The rest of them are thwarted, withered-up old things, for all their giggling and fat!"

Byrd came round from the kitchen and drove off in his truck, grinning back at them and waving. She looked after him and said, "I hear your Hannah's had another baby."

Nona bristled. Who was Ruth Shaver to talk about Hannah in that slighting voice? Did she imagine that the whole town did not know about her and Edward, going on year after year, though their wickedness must be as flat and dull by now as marriage? They only kept it up out of vanity; Edward because it set him up to mix his pleasure with books and talk, and Ruth because an affair with him made her seem a woman of the world, a man's mistress, and the word

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was still glamorous to her. Nona would like to tell her opinion of this dry lechery!

She said, tartly: "She has, and she'll have more of 'em, I don't doubt. Hannah's the kind who scarcely needs a man to have her babies! There's some women I know who could carry on for years without a bit of decent natural flesh and blood to show for it!"

Lilias pushed open the door and came out, carrying the tray, Mamma tipping behind her, intent on food. The ladies took their 'tall amber glasses and sipped them eagerly. Lilias fixed the whisky nicely, with lemon and a spray of mint from the bed by the kitchen door, so that by the looks of it it might have been iced tea.

Mamma settled herself a little apart from the others, for their chatter had begun to disturb the pleasant calm that lapped her, like a silent tide impinging little by little upon the dwindling island of her consciousness. She enjoyed their talk when she was not too close to be annoyed by the meaning of their words; the sound of it was a soothing accompaniment to the slow flowing of the tide, like the sound of the sea. She perched lightly in her distant chair and pecked at her cracker and dipped into her glass; with her little round smooth head and sharp nose and bright, expressionless eyes she was as pretty and mindless and transient as a bird.

Lilias said: "I'm sorry there are just the crackers. I got up too late to make sandwiches this afternoon. How is Gran'ma today?" she asked Nona.

"About the same." Nona put Gran'ma aside because she was fond of her, and the thought of the grand old woman sick and feeble had the power to spoil her afternoon.

Callie said: "Go ask Dell to see if there isn't something, cookies, anyway, in the cake-box." But the others cried, no, not to bother! They were surprised to find that they did not mind the store-bought crackers. It was the mild little toddy that was important to them. The weak whisky heartened

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and mellowed them. The antagonism between Miss Shaver and Nona blunted. The ladies and Miss Shaver regarded one another now with a sort of tolerant affection, the pity each felt for the other taking the edge off their common envy.

They saw Mr. Tom Weems coming down the street, and urged him in. Arriving at this moment, he was no longer a boring, too-talkative old man, but a stout, well-preserved, witty gentleman, spruce in a clean white suit, who brought a full male flavor to their gaiety.

He eased himself down onto his favorite seat on the top step and took his glass without a glance at Liliás. She was too young. Even Ruth Shaver was too narrow and brittle and varnished for him. "Little hard green apples," he called them to himself. He had reached the discriminating age where a handsome, firm-fleshed woman of fifty was the most desirable of females. Agnes's fine legs so close to his glance, with their sleek curves looking as controlled and corseted as her body, fascinated him. He felt an almost ungovernable desire to reach out and nip the resilient flesh. Neither was he blind to the charms of the other ladies. He let his eyes rest on them warmly—on Maudie Tidball with her quilting of rich untidy fat; on Callie with her softened, indolent body freshly washed and powdered; on Nona, still a little brisk, and youthful, but ripening. In another few years, when her plump hips and breasts and arms had thickened a little more and softened, his connoisseur's eye told him that she would be a tempting morsel. They were all of an age to enjoy flattery and a broad joke, to appreciate a man's natural pleasure in the casual contact of his hands and knees with soft firm flesh.

The ladies sensed his appreciation and it warmed them. It was a pleasant thing at fifty-five or so to be admired and ogled and even pinched a little. They all felt, for the moment at least, that to sit here chatting and sipping, in the cool of the afternoon, mellowed by flattery and whisky and the late

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sunshine, with the tumult of their youth behind them, was to be at the very heyday of life.

Only Agnes, looking at Lillas, so amazingly pretty and girlish that she might have been eighteen instead of twenty-eight, thought, a little wistfully, of youth. But she had had her day, and now she was satisfied to be safe. A woman was never safe until she was old enough to be out of danger of her own foolishness. Agnes felt suddenly sorry for Lillas, with her young life so barren of temptation.

"Lillas," she said, "it's pleasant here for old ladies like the rest of us, but it must sometimes be a little dull for you. How would you like to go back to New York with me for a little visit?"

"Why, I don't know. That's awfully sweet of you. But I don't know if I could, Aunt Agnes."

Lillas was surprised and a little startled; she had the curious feeling of living over again a happening out of the past. Agnes's words and her instinctive response to them, the whole scene, was so like the time Edward Gay offered to take her to the University dances, eight years before. Only the eager excitement that stirred the listeners then was lacking now. Matty was upstairs in her closed room, and Mamma, withdrawn from their talk into her private calm, did not hear. Maudie Tidball said: "Oh, Lillas! Wouldn't that be fine!" And Callie said, indolently, "It would be nice. Maybe we might manage it later on."

Lillas murmured her thanks again.

"Well," Agnes said, "you must do as you like, of course. I'd enjoy finding the right clothes for you, and a beau. It would amuse me to have a pretty girl to marry off again."

"That's sweet of you," Lillas said. "I'd love to if I can." But she knew she would not go.

She remembered something Nona had said to her long ago: "There's something real satisfying in making your

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life out of the people and the things you were born to." She was doing that. Only Nona had said, "making the life you want." That was the difference between them. Nona had wants, and she had been satisfied with just life. Liliás thought of Byrd Lucas and the farm, and a faint regret touched her. It was not really regret; only a sort of vague resigned sadness at her perception of her own limitations. If she had been different, full-blooded and bolder and demanding, it would have been regret.

She thought of last night in Gran'ma's big, dim, smelly room. She and Hannah sat there in their incongruous bright party dresses and watched the old woman struggle against death. Enormous and helpless under her quilts, she heaved and groaned ceaselessly, her consciousness gone but her strong old flesh still living and rebellious.

While they sat there, Hannah's last baby wakened and cried, and Hannah went up and brought it down with her. Sitting in the circle of light from the lowered lamp, close to Gran'ma's bed, she changed it deftly and nursed it and laid it down on the couch to sleep. It fretted there a while, and the small shrill whimpering cries must have penetrated to Gran'ma and disturbed her, for suddenly she moaned and her eyes opened and she tried to lift herself up. Hannah went over to her and helped her up onto the commode by her bed. Liliás sickened at the sight of the poor tired old flesh still clinging to its functions. The sight of the baby, fed and laid to sleep so close to age and death, sickened her too.

The life of people like Gran'ma and Hannah and Byrd was too rich and cluttered and coarse for her fastidiousness. Their avidity for life shocked her, and it frightened her to realize how they would all struggle against death. Their eager birthing and living and the final defiance of their passionate flesh all revolted her.

She had found her own place. It was here in the calm old crumbling house, sitting on the porch with the other ladies,

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waiting on them, growing to be like them, mellowing after them into old age through the long indolent days and the long quiet nights—a peaceful, empty, aimless life that was only a painless slow ripening into the inevitable bland fruit of death.

THE END